STEAMED? AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE
TEA PARTY MOVEMENT

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in
Communication Studies

by
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Ryan Guy

Spring 2011

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ABSTRACT

STEAMED? AN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF THE
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The following thesis is a critical-rhetorical ethnography of the Tea Party movement. This study follows my own lived experience of joining, assimilating, and performing advocacy as a member of the Tea Party movement. Three research questions were constructed to focus the study on the topics of newcomer assimilation/socialization, the role of counterpublics in the development of movement discourses, and the rhetorical development of the Tea Party as a social movement. Data collection consisted of ethnographic inquiry for a period of 11 months. During this time, I engaged in direct advocacy as a member of several west-coast regional Tea Party groups. At the conclusion of ethnographic fieldwork, a small number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the Tea Party movement. This triangulation of ethnographic and qualitative methodologies produced a large body of data to be studied.
The data analysis process drew on rhetorical methodologies of combining textual fragments, discovered in the field, to invent rhetorical texts representative of the Tea Party movement. These texts were then critiqued using an analytical framework constructed from theoretical perspectives of organizational assimilation and socialization, social movement rhetoric, and theories of the public sphere. Following this analysis implications concerning the problematic nature of the Tea Party's future as a social movement were discussed. Additionally, insights into the current theoretical understandings of enclaved counterpublics are presented. The study concludes with a discussion of limitations and directions for future scholarship.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This forum is for Tea Party activists of all nations to talk about issues and topics relevant to the Tea Party Movement, or Tea Party related issues. You must adhere to those topics or your posts will not be allowed. We don’t allow advertising or campaigning by candidates. No profanity is allowed and advocating violence will not be tolerated. We will not tolerate racism. No attacks on other posters are allowed. This is our private blog for our Tea Party activist members only. We have the right to set the rules. Do you understand and agree to abide by these rules and do you state that you are a Tea Party activist that agrees with our core values? (Tea Party Patriots, n.d.a)

In April of 2009, I decided to take a trip. I was in the process of making my final choice of graduate programs and taking the time to visit the campuses seemed like a good way to inform that decision. I thought the trip would take me up the west coast to several college campuses and cities in which I had friends. Little did I know, this was the start of a journey that would dominate my life as a scholar and change my understanding of American political discourse.

On April 7, 2009, I departed San Diego, California and headed north. Over the course of the following ten days I planned to visit Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Stockton, San Jose, San Francisco, Chico, Corvallis, and Portland. As drove up Interstate 5, I noticed the viral imagery promoting a “Tax Day Tea Party Protest” had found its way onto telephone poles, storefronts, and freeway overpasses. On April 15th I was visiting my old debate partner in San Jose and we decided to go check out one of the local protests. Upon reaching the specified location, we found an interesting scene. There were
hundreds of protestors walking around with protest signs. What was more interesting, however, was the amount of dialogue taking place between protestors. Having attended my fair share protests, while I was at Humboldt State, this amount of conversation during the rally seemed peculiar. It was almost as if they were less interested in the protest and more interested in talking to each other. Fascinated and desiring a closer look, my friend and I wrote some conservative sounding quotations\(^1\) on pieces of cardboard and headed into the crowd. As we walked around the chaotic square we heard and participated in conversations—both short and long—on topics such as the bailouts, the stimulus bill, Obama’s control of the youth, and Ayn Rand’s novels.\(^2\) Amidst the cornucopia of interactions, the most common thing we observed was the exchange of contact information and plans to continue discussions at later points in time. To be polite, I scribbled down my e-mail address and gave it to a few people who asked.

In the weeks following the Tax Day Tea Party, I was privy to several mass e-mail conversations. In those e-mail messages, I observed e-mail dialog between many of the individuals I had spoken with at the rally. After expressing limitations of the Internet, many participants suggested that it would be best to come up with a place where they could all get together and discuss future actions and plans. I was unaware of it at this point, however, across the nation many of those who had participated in their own local rallies were also organizing into groups and planing recurring meetings (Armey & Kibbe, 2010).

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\(^1\) Specifically “Who is John Galt” from Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* and “Government is the problem” a partial quotation from Ronald Reagan.

\(^2\) As homage to this first experience with the Tea Party I used Randian quotations on all signs I created for protests during my study.
After the 2009 National Tax Day Tea Party protest participants started coming together and forming regional groups. In the two years since this original genesis the movement has grown to include over one thousand loosely connected regional groups (Tea Party Patriots, n.d.b). Most hold recurring meetings and use computer-mediated communication technologies to plan meet-ups and impromptu events. Continued growth and creation of new groups is expected in the future as expansion is among the stated goals of the Tea Party movement (Bexley, 2009; Gullett, 2009).

Justification and Relevance

There are three key reasons why the rhetoric and communicative practices of the Tea Party are in need of study. First, as a self-proclaimed libertarian-conservative grassroots movement, the Tea Party represents an area significantly lacking in scholarly research in the fields of rhetoric and communication.3 Second, rhetorical studies of social movements have begun to stagnate. Some scholars have linked this stagnation to a perceived deficiency in the existing means of executing rhetorical inquiries into movements.4 New research on conservative social movements—using an approach that seeks to marry rhetorical analysis with qualitative inquiry—might help to reinvigorate and provide new directions for the area of study. Third, the Tea Party movement has been successful at promoting a new type of conservative candidate. As of November 2, 2010

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3 Much of the existing research on conservative social movements has been focused on movement leadership and not the populace and vernacular of those participating in the movements activities. The little scholarship that does exist is predominately made from outside perspectives.

4 DeLuca (1999) offers a stinging critique of traditional methods as pioneered by Simmons (1991); however, his proposed alternative direction of using images as has only been minimally expanded on by scholars.
they have been moderately successful in electing a variety of regionally backed candidates to public office and several incumbent politicians have publicly aligned themselves with the Tea Party’s cause. A better understanding of the culture and discursive practices of the movement will help illuminate a growing power block in American democracy.

Overview of the Study

The following inquiry seeks to complicate understandings of the American Right. In the pages to follow, I ask you to accompany me on an adventure beyond the ivory tower, past the talking heads, and into the lived experience of a Tea Party Patriot. When I started this project, I wanted to find a way to write myself into other people’s stories. This inquiry shows how complicated that process can be. I invite you to be my guest and will share in my lived experience of becoming a Tea Party Patriot.

I occupy a unique position that allows me to perform scholarship of the Tea Party. My background—having grown up in a small very conservative part of Southern California—gives me access to cultural understandings of the Right. Having a foundation of understanding makes it easier for me to perform my identity as a Tea Party Patriot and genuinely interact with different individuals in the movement. In the pages that follow, I

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5 Of the 140 Tea Party backed candidates who ran for congress, only 53 were elected.

6 Self identifying Tea Party politician, Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, formed a House Tea Party caucus. As of March 2011 54 congresspersons, 12.5% of House are members of this caucus (Bachman, 2011). Five current US senators also have publicly stated their alignment with the Tea Party movement (Herszenhorn, 2011).

7 There has been some disagreement by outsiders as to what a member of the Tea Party movement should be called. In an attempt to overcome the negative association with the term “Tea-Bagger” all of the groups I associated with adopted the title of “Tea Party Patriot.” In the spirit of ethnographic emergence and keeping with the vernacular of these groups, I use the “Patriot” throughout this manuscript.
will discuss and analyze my story as a Tea Party Patriot. Through an exploration of my performance and lived experience in the Tea Party I am able to populate unique sites of discovery. Ultimately, this process will allow for an analysis and discussion of the Tea Party movement that would be inaccessible from the perspective of an outsider.

Moving forward, this thesis develops in complexity through a progression of logical steps. The specifics of the study proceed through chapters reviewing literature, describing method, conducting analysis, and discussing the findings of this study. In the final section of this introductory chapter will briefly preview the content of each of these chapters.

Chapter II of this thesis contains a thorough review of literature relevant to the topic. In this chapter, I construct an analytical toolkit composed of rhetorical and communication theory. This section also provides needed context to understand and support criticism of the Tea Party as a social movement.

Chapter III explores the methodology used to conduct this inquiry of the Tea Party movement. In this chapter, I start with an explanation of the triangulated methodology used to conduct data collection. This chapter continues by providing a description of the multi-textuality of the Tea Party movement and how the methodology was adapted to facilitate access. Finally, this chapter concludes with a detailed description of the rhetorical methodology used to conduct the analysis found in chapter IV.

Chapter IV contains an in-depth analysis of the Tea Party movement. Using the rhetorical methodology developed in Chapter III this analysis presents three thematic categories representative of the communicative action and rhetoric of the Tea Party
movement. Drawing on theory developed in the analytical toolkit, found in Chapter II, this chapter presents a scholarly critique of the Tea Party movement.

Chapter V consists of a discussion of the findings and implications of this study. In this chapter the research questions— to be presented next—are discussed and answered based on the content of the analysis in Chapter IV. This chapter concludes with the discussion of implications derived from the overall study and some directions for future research.

Research Questions

In this chapter, the background and reasons to study the discourses of the Tea Party movement were discussed. Moving forward it becomes useful, and necessary to focus the direction of this thesis through the use of three research questions. The first question focuses on the means and ways in which new members find themselves assimilated into the culture and practices of the Tea Party movement. The second question seeks to understand how the dialogues and communicative actions, found in the protected meeting places of Tea Party groups, act to construct and develop the rhetoric of the Tea Party movement. The final question calls for the exploration of how various means of socialization and assimilation impact the rhetorical evolution of the Tea Party as a social movement.

- RQ1: How are new members assimilated and socialized into the culture and organizational practices of the Tea Party movement?
- RQ2: How do the inner discursive practices of the Tea Party movement facilitate the development of Tea Party discourses?
RQ3: How have the socialization and assimilation practices of the Tea-Party movement impacted the rhetorical construction of the Tea Party as a social movement?
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent public discourse the Tea Party has been described as an Astroturf front for the GOP (Dade, 2010), a neo-Nazi organization (Faughnan, 2009), a third party (Hollar, 2009), a conservative reform movement (O’Hara, 2010), and a destructive force in American politics (Bybee, 2010). While aspects of these characterizations might have some basis in reality, they primarily serve as examples of how misunderstood the Tea Party movement is. To date scholars in the fields of communication and rhetoric have yet to produce any work exploring the Tea Party movement. The following review of literature proceeds in three steps. First, a brief history of the Tea Party movement’s origin will provide the context of the study. Second, key theoretical standpoints useful in explaining the assimilation and socialization of members inside the Tea Party movement are flushed out. Last, a theoretical framework is derived from the body of rhetorical social movement research.

The Origins of the Tea Party

If you look at almost any regional Tea Party group’s website you will likely find a description resembling: The Tea Party movement is a grass roots organization comprised of non-partisan individuals who believe in: limited government, fiscal responsibility, and free markets (Florida Tea Party, n.d.; Arizona Tea Party, n.d.;
In his book documenting the roots and reasons for the Tea Party movement, John O’Hara (2010) traces the movement back to a protest that took place in Binghamton, New York on January 24, 2009. Angry about a proposed obesity tax on sugary drinks, a small group of activists held a small protest which culminated with a ceremonial dumping of Arizona brand iced tea into the Susquehanna River (Moyer, 2009).

In mid-February 2009, Rick Santelli of CNBC criticized the Obama administration’s plan to refinance upside-down mortgages (McGrath, 2010). Santelli’s statements—which went viral on sites such as YouTube—called for traders to hold a Tea Party and dump property derivatives into the Chicago River (Santelli, 2009). Within several hours a variety of websites and social networking groups had appeared under the banner of the Tea Party (Gold, 2010). The appearance, growth, and composition of these sites was discussed the next day on a variety of conservative news outlets such as FoxNews and conservative talk radio (Berger, 2009). According to O’Hara (2010), following these early events, “tea party” related protests started to occur across the nation. Authors of conservative blogs started promoting the idea that Americans frustrated by the bailouts, stimulus bills, and actions of the Obama administration should “Tea Bag” their elected representatives.” More specifically blogs instructed their readers

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1 The term “Tea-Bagger” has gained notoriety as a pejorative term for a Tea Party activist. Unaware of its connotation as an act of sexual dominance, some early acolytes of the Tea Party movement referred to themselves as “Tea-Baggers” only to be embarrassed upon learning the connection to the sex act. It is important to note, that in this original protest, the connection to sexual act was purposeful and aimed at symbolically dominating politicians who had ignored constituents pleas not to pass bailouts and stimulus bills.
to buy tea bags and mail them to politicians in Washington, D.C. and respective state capitals (St. Clair, 2009).

Following the success of the “mail based tea-bagging,” conservative bloggers started to promote a national day of protest. Since most of the reactionary anger had been about spending and the possibility of tax increases, April 15th was chosen. Bloggers started to make posts encouraging “patriots” to be a “silent majority no more!” Viral imagery told readers that “revolution is brewing” and that they should organize and attend regional protests across the nation on April 15, 2009. Having caught wind of the proposed conservative protests, conservative talking heads such as Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Rick Santelli used their reach to promote the protests and sent waves of right-leaning supporters to the cause.

Since the 2009 protests the Tea Party movement has grown to include over one thousand loosely connected regional groups (Tea Party Patriots, n.d.b). Some hold recurring meetings, while others use computer-mediated means of communication to plan meet-ups and impromptu events. Following success in the 2010 midterm election, Tea Party backed representatives have established Tea Party caucuses in both the House of Representatives and the United States Senate (Sonmez, 2011). Continued growth and creation of new groups is expected in the future as expansion is amongst the stated goals of the Tea Party movement (Bexley, 2009; Gullett, 2009).

In this past section, I briefly covered the historical progression of the Tea Party movement. The next section draws heavily on theory found in perspectives of organizational communication. Specifically, I will describe and discuss the various perspectives of how assimilation and socialization is facilitated in organizations.
Theories of Socialization and Assimilation

When people decide to join an organization, they typically undergo a process of organizational socialization. Organizational socialization has been defined as the process by which new organizational members are introduced to their roles, other members, and the rules—both explicit and implicit—of the organization (Kramer, 2010). Socialization of new members into an organization is an important part of preserving the organization’s culture and operations. Traditionally the socialization of new members served to maintain the organization’s effectiveness when it came to accomplishing tasks and goals (Bullis, 1993).

A desired outcome of organizational socialization is for new members to become assimilated into the organization. Gailliard, Myers, and Seibold, (2010) argue that organizational assimilation takes place when new members become familiar enough with an organization to assume their role. From this process, organizational socialization and assimilation can be seen as connected processes that are encouraged by organizations, in order to preserve the organizational status quo, and maintain the organization’s ability to accomplish its goals.

Socialization and Assimilation Tactics

Modern research and theory of organizational socialization and assimilation can be traced back to Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) model of organizational socialization. Their model broke down organizational socialization into three dimensions. The first dimension is the functional area that new members are pushed towards. This is often related to the first role and functional position they will fill when they become part of the organization. The second dimension, inclusiveness, is how near the social “center
of things” a new member is (p. 222). This dimension includes how well the new member fits to existing social norms, values, and adherence to social rules. Van Maanen and Schein (1979) argue that most new members start on the edge and only move towards the center when “they can prove an understanding and acceptance of the groups norms and values” (p. 222). The final dimension is hierarchy. This dimension relates to how members move up the hierarchy in the organization.

Van Maanen and Schein (1979) also discuss the power organizations have over new members and the ways that this power can be used to influence how they assimilate into the organization. Based on their research of organizational socialization they went on to propose a typology of six opposing tactics that organizations use to socialize new members: (1) Collective/individual tactics either place new members with other new members or isolate them during the socialization process; (2) Formal/informal tactics are used to segregate new members from existing members until they have undergone training and orientation sessions; (3) Sequential/variable tactics either have all new members complete a known set of synchronous classes and/or socialization experiences, or have them complete random steps that keep them guessing; (4) Fixed/variable tactics relate to whether or not a new member has knowledge of how long they have to move from one aspect of socialization to another; (5) Serial/disjunctive tactics relate to the presence or absence of experienced organizational members to mentor new members; and (6) Investiture/diversiture tactics are used to validate—or strip away—the skills and traits already possessed by a new member.

Later work on socialization categorized the collective, formal, sequential, fixed, serial, and investiture tactics as types institutionalized socialization (Allen &
Meyer, 1990b). Allen and Meyer went on to argue that institutional socialization is “characterized by common initiatory and learning experiences” (1990a, p. 847). These experiences are formal and serve to adapt new members to expected roles. The opposing set of tactics—individual, informal, random, variable, disjunctive, and diversiture—make up what Allen and Meyer describe as “individualized socialization” (p. 848). When members undergo individualized socialization they are left to learn and adapt in isolation. Organizations using this style of socialization allow new members to engage in the activity of role innovation, as they attempt to invent their role in the organization. Allen and Meyer found that new members undergoing individualized socialization often suffered from increased anxiety and a decrease of organizational commitment.

Communication Based Explanations of Socialization and Assimilation

Waldeck and Myers (2007) argue that several theories of communication help to explain the processes organizations put an individual through during organizational socialization and assimilation. First, uncertainty reduction theory (Bradac, 2001) explains many of the behaviors of new members in organizations. When individuals are new in an organization, they will have a need to reduce uncertainty about their role in the organization. Many of the socialization tactics employed by organizations are designed to facilitate the reduction of uncertainty. Waldeck and Myers also argue that the tendency of new organizational members to engage in information seeking tactics can also be explained as attempts to reduce uncertainty. Research has shown that new organizational members often weigh social costs of admitting ignorance of role responsibilities (Miller,
1991). In order to reduce their uncertainty new organizational members will pursue overt and covert information seeking strategies.

Social exchange theory (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) posits that human interactions and relationships are the result of a cost-benefit analysis and comparison of choices. When given a choice, social exchange theory predicts that an individual will choose the option that provides the largest benefit. Waldeck and Myers (2007) argue that during the processes of organizational socialization, social exchange theory explains the way new members create relationships with other members, and also how organizations choose to retain and promote members.

**Dimensional Theory of Organizational Socialization**

Myers and Oetzel (2003) developed a dimensional instrument—the OAI—to study the complexities of organizational assimilation. In a review of existing theory of organizational assimilation, Myers and Oetzel point out that the existing conceptualizations of organizational assimilation operate under the assumption that an individual’s assimilation into an organization functions under a linear model, where assimilation increases with time. They also explored the limits of existing dimensions of organizational assimilation in providing explanatory power to a variety of organizational types and contexts.

In response to the limitations found in the existing perspectives of assimilation research, Myers and Oetzel (2003) developed a comprehensive set of dimensions representative of organizational assimilation and used them to validate a representative model. Their research yielded six dimensions that both confirmed and expanded existing
perspectives of organizational assimilation. The dimensions included: familiarity with others, acculturation, recognition, involvement, job competency, and adaptation/role negotiation.

There are two important implications of Myers and Oetzel’s (2003) research in relation to the analysis of assimilation in the Tea Party Movement. First, Myers and Oetzel argue that attrition rates during the first four weeks of organizational membership are three times higher than those who make it past the four-week mark. Part of what makes a social movement successful is the recruitment and retention of new members. Myers and Oetzel argue that an organization with a better grasp of the types of communicative practices involved in assimilation will be better able to encourage processes that lead to effective assimilation and retention of organizational members.

Second, Myers and Oetzel (2003) argue that by encouraging positive aspects of organizational assimilation, organizations can improve the climate and culture of an organization. In Tea Party discourses, attempts by existing members that act to facilitate effective organizational assimilation among new members might lead to “higher levels of organizational identification and satisfaction that may encourage a more favorable culture” (p. 451).

A Rhetoric of Movements

Elements of rhetorical theory can be used to develop an analytical toolkit useful in conducting an inquiry of the Tea Party movement. In the following section, I draw upon various theories of social movement rhetoric and the public sphere to build a toolkit useful in conducting an analysis of the wide variety of data to be collected in this
project. It is important to note that the rhetorical study of social movements has been characterized by a history of missteps, stagnation, and dead ends. In developing this toolkit I pull aspects useful to my analysis from this history, ignoring some of historical remnants not useful in conducting an analysis of the Tea Party.

Social Movement Rhetoric

Early studies of social movements were, in a way, a response to limitations seen in studying the traditional rhetoric of great speakers. In Griffin’s (1952) work he challenged rhetorical scholars to move past the highly confined and conventional studies of “great orators” (1952, p. 184). To Griffin, the role of the social movement rhetorical scholar was to look at the multiplicity of different voices, speech acts, and audiences that made up an atmosphere of public address found in the rhetoric of a given movement. Griffin went on to encourage scholars to study movements within a particular rhetorical pattern. Griffin’s framework viewed a given social movement in three phases of advancement: inception, rhetorical crisis, and termination. Although Griffin and others were successful in advancing work on social movements utilizing this framework, the movements of the 1960s and beyond challenged this model leading to a need for even less traditional methods.

The social movements of the 1960s challenged and expanded scholarship of these movements. Haiman (1967) argued that the rhetoric of 1960s “street protests” exceeded the bounds of traditional rhetoric found in verbal messages. During this era scholars saw a shift away from the leadership-centered movements of the past and

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2 DeLuca (1999) provides an in-depth discussion of the faults and problematic directions found in the history of social movement rhetoric.
towards the street-centered rhetoric that dominated this era. Another key expansion that emerged from this era was the idea that confrontational rhetorics—common in the protests of the era—marked a divergence from the movements of the past. Where past movements had fought to gain voice and be included in the status quo, the street protests seemed to advocate for their own discourses that existed mutually exclusive from the mainstream. Scholars such as Scott and Smith (1969) argued that the rhetoric of “The New Left” movement was about challenging dominant norms and resisting the perceived establishment (p. 3). Scott and Smith went on to spark a controversy concerning the non-critical stance rhetorical scholars had traditionally held. Tracing rhetoric back to antiquity, Scott and Smith argue that rhetoric had typically been used as an “instrument of established society” (p. 7). In the face of the civil turmoil of the 1960s, Scott and Smith took a critical stance to consider that traditional notions of “civility and decorum serve as masks for the preservation of injustice” (p. 8).

Out of the studies of 1960s, social movements came two major competing perspectives of how rhetorical scholars should approach social movement studies. The first perspective, led by Herbert Simons (1970), was the “functions” perspective that sought to identify the core functions of a social movement. Simons viewed social movements as organizations, led by individuals who had to meet a variety of rhetorical requirements. In developing a functional approach to studying social movements, Steward (1980) expanded on Simon’s ideas and argued that rhetoric was the means by which leaders formed social movements, challenged norms, and fought for—or resisted—change. According to Steward, the functional approach to studying social movements would allow theorists to make generalizations about the rhetoric. The
functional approach, advanced by Steward, encouraged rhetorical scholars to move past the study of small components of social movements—such as events and particular figures—and consider movements in broad and generalizable ways.

In contrast to the functional approach, the second perspective that emerged out of the 1960s was a Burkean influenced approach that sought to study social movements as a dramatistic form. Griffin (1969) was interested in expanding Kenneth Burke’s theories to the study of social movements. Drawing on Burke, Griffin proposed that to study a movement was to study progress, form, and drama. Through all this, Griffin proposed that you could discover a movement’s motives, and though motives discover the purpose of the movement. Later, while reflecting on writing his somewhat abstract 1969 work, Griffin (1980) discussed the related importance of the countermovement. To Griffin the existence of the countermovement—that might function inside of an existing movement—was a critical part of the dialectical construction of the movement’s rhetoric. Discussing this dialectical construction of movements, Cathcart (1972) proposed that movements are sustained and defined by the reciprocal confrontational acts between themselves and the establishment. Cathcart (1978) later expanded on this idea into the tendency for movements to engage in acts of ritual conflict focused on challenging societal norms.

During the bulk of the 1980s, the rhetorical studies of movements saw little in the way of major advancement. Most research of social movements of the era took place in the disciplines of sociology and tended to focus on the ontological conceptualization of
movements at a meta-theoretical level. It was not until 1989, however, that social change rhetoric saw a reawakening. The translation and publication of Habermas’s (1962) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* led to new perspectives of social change. In the next section, the growth and development of this new branch of social change rhetoric will be explored.

**The Rhetoric of Publics**

At the end of the 1980s the translation and publication of Habermas’s (1962) thesis: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* led rhetorical scholarship to develop to a new type of social movement studies. Through the concept of publics—and later counterpublics—a group of “New Social movement” theorists set out to use Habermasian theory to understand a movement’s interests from within—and thus achieve what scholars of the functional and dramatistic approaches had not (McKee, 2005).

Habermas’s (1962) theory envisioned the public sphere as an inclusive discursive space in which the citizens of a society gathered, discussed, and debated over the issues of the day. Habermas argued that the European bourgeois public sphere, which emerged in eighteenth century coffee houses and salons, represented an idealized form of the public sphere. Individuals engaging in discussion in these spaces would share and debate their views with one and another. Habermas saw this dialectic encounter as a part of one’s social life where individuals, as part of a larger public, could construct public opinion through critical rational discourse. Habermas argued that these discussions

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3 For an in depth analysis of the sociological perspectives of social movements in the early 1980s see Touraine (1985).
served to fill the gap between the state and the people by creating what he called a “civil society” (p. 30).

In response to its translation, many criticized Habermas’s conception of the public sphere, claiming problems with its exclusionary nature. In these critiques scholars pointed out that the bourgeois public sphere was highly patriarchal (Fraser, 1992) and oblivious to the existence of public spheres that included minority voices (Negt & Kluge, 1993; Ryan, 1992). As a result of its exclusionary nature, scholars accused Habermas of privileging of a hegemonic public sphere. Fraser (1992) argued that while there was still value in Habermas’s theory, an all-inclusive model could never exist. Fraser goes on to critique Habermas for not developing a theory of the public sphere that extended beyond the bourgeois era. Turning to examples of the feminist movement and others, Fraser argued that groups that are marginalized by the establishment would form their own public spheres, or counterpublics.4

In her analysis of the bourgeois public sphere, Fraser (1992) discusses how the oppression of a traditional public sphere—of kings and lords—shifted to a hegemonic oppression. In the bourgeois public sphere the ideology of the majority ruled supreme and the voices of the minority were silenced. Counterpublics, however, provided a space where the subordinated could develop oppositional rhetorics that challenged the dominant constructions of their own identities and desires. Felski (1989), in discussing the power of a feminist counterpublic, argues that a counterpublic, unlike the bourgeois public

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4 The term counterpublic first appeared in Oskar Negt’s and Alexander Kluge’s 1972 work Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung. Since the work was not translated into English—from German—until 1993 the term counterpublic was introduced to the west by Rita Felski in her 1989 book Beyond Feminist Aesthetics.
sphere—which sought to universalize—has the ability to offer affirmation to a multiplicity of interests.

Important to the rhetorical study of social movements, Fraser (1992) argued that the affirmation of interests should not be viewed in strictly an internal sense. Although counterpublics offer a safe space for the development of discourses, they also exert a public presence. This public presence acts as a means to distribute their internally developed rhetorics into a competing dominant public. Fraser argues that these outward discourses add an important attribute of duality to counterpublics. “They function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics” (Fraser, 1992, p. 124).

At this point, it is important to consider some academic disagreement that has existed between the conceptualization of counterpublics and countermovements. Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) argue that countermovements appear in response to successful movements. Movements can achieve success “by putting their issues on the public agenda or by influencing public policy” (p. 1635). Thus, countermovements are defined in their public actions to counter the agenda and policy setting achievements of dominant movements. Warner (2002), discussing a conceptualization of counterpublics, argues that “counterpublics come into being through an address to indefinite strangers” (p. 118). In particular, normative ideas are replaced—inside of the protected space of the counterpublic—with the ideas dominant to the counterpublic. For example, Warner explains that inside a homosexual counterpublic “no one is in the closet,” and this is expressed normatively in the group’s internal discourse (p. 118). Although Warner
(2002) and Meyer and Staggenborg (1996) suggest that a significant difference exists between counterpublics and countermovements, Fraser’s (1992) duality of counterpublics situates the countermovement inside the publicly expressive side of a given counterpublic. Thus, all counterpublics can be seen as countermovements. However, a countermovement absent a protected place to develop counter discourses would not constitute a counterpublic.

Brouwer (2006) argues that a public sphere theory of counterpublics advances communication and rhetorical studies by “expanding our objects of inquiry beyond rational-critical norms of public deliberation” (p. 198). He goes on to argue that by studying counterpublics, rhetorical scholars are forced to accept that the entire continuum of publicly significant speech acts do not occur through means approved by society as a whole. Brouwer uses the Barbie Liberation Organization’s (BLO) gender modification protests as an example. In this case, the BLO switched the voice chips from talking Barbie dolls with those of “G.I. Joe” action figures. Actions such as this get at the widespread variety of clandestine methods a counterpublic might use as part of its rhetorical arsenal.

Recent developments in counterpublics theory have focused on the recognition of a multiplicity of publics. Warner (2002) argued that in a given society a plethora of competing publics—and counterpublics—exist simultaneously. Further, it must be understood that individuals may have a variety of ties to, memberships in, and levels of involvement in these publics. Some publics might even share a variety of characteristics that tend to pull in a similar group of people. Consider the potential intersectionality between the pro-choice movement and women’s movement. Although
Brouwer (2006) recognizes these shared characteristics, he cautions scholars to remember that while competing publics share characteristics, each is unique and should be studied independently.

Public sphere conceptions of counterpublics have acted as useful tools in looking at social movements. A variety of studies that have emerged over the last decade use counterpublics theory to focus on the oppositional rhetorics used by different social movements. Present in this body of research were historical reevaluations of the following movements: HIV/AIDS (Brouwer, 2005; Chay-Nemeth, 2001), anti-suffrage (Maddux, 2004), reproductive rights (Bone, 2010), and the black press (Squires, 2001).

More recently, theories of counterpublics have been used to look at the ways social movements function across international and cultural borders via the Internet: (Albrecht, 2006; Dahlberg, 2001; 2007; McDorman, 2001; Milioni, 2009).

Although scholars studying counterpublics have helped us understand the rhetoric of social movements, there are differences among them as to how to define the term. In fact the large variety of usages has led to confusion and disagreement. Asen and Brouwer (2001) argue that what is counter about counterpublics cannot be absolutely determined. As an alternative, they present a series of key candidates which can be considered and evaluated for their conceptual value. First, when unequal access and distribution of power/resources privilege dominant social groups in public discourse, counterpublics can be located in the identities of individuals who create oppositional rhetoric (Felski, 1989; Fraser, 1992). Asen and Brouwer (2001) argue that this approach is most useful when explicating historical experiences of exclusion and oppression. New social movement scholars have found this conceptualization useful when looking at
movements whose primary goal appears to be the affirmation of identities. For example the gay rights advocacy group Queer Nation used the slogan “We’re Here/We’re Queer/Get Used to It,” to publicly affirm their sexual identities (Stanley, 1991).

A second approach in the conceptualization of counterpublics is to locate it in the discourses offered to the wider public through a process of counterpublicity. In this approach the elements of a counterpublic spread through the discourse of dominant publics. Asen and Brouwer (2001) warn that this approach can get muddled as discourses are captured by the dominant public and have alternative meanings attached. For example, the term “sexual harassment” may have originated as part of a counterpublic discourse and then been co-opted by a larger public into jokes or sketch comedies (Spiers & Davidson, 2006).

A final approach to conceptualizing counterpublics used by rhetorical scholars is to focus on specific places or “spheres” that have fostered counterpublic discourse in the past. Asen and Brouwer (2001) argue that critics who use this approach foreground “the situational traits or institutional arrangements that may advantage or disadvantage participants even in the absence of stated rules of entry” (p. 9). The problem with this approach is that certain spaces will not necessarily facilitate better counterpublic discourse than other alternatives. Narrowing the critic’s focus to specific locations might facilitate a more manageable study; however, this approach garners the risk of missing discourses emerging out of a particular view.

Recently several scholars have attempted to overcome the conceptual and definitional problems outlined above. Specifically scholars have tried to present counterpublic typologies that seek to clarify the specific states of a counterpublic (Chay-
Nemeth, 2001; Squires, 2002). The ability to categorize a counterpublic in commonly defined terms is a useful tool for rhetorical scholars. Using typologies facilitates a move past the vagueness—as discussed by Asen and Brouwer (2001)—by seeking out specific characteristics representative of social movements.

Squires’s (2002) expansion of public sphere theory is particularly useful in that she created a topology of counterpublics. Squires was interested in the activities and political fortunes of the black press social movement. In her research, she developed a model to explore the three ways a marginalized public sphere might function in a status quo filled with dynamic political, economic, social, and cultural conditions.

A public can enclave itself, hiding counterhegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning. It is also possible to create a counterpublic which can engage in debate with wider publics to test ideas and perhaps utilize traditional social movement tactics (boycotts, civil disobedience). Finally, a public that seeks separation from other publics for reasons other than oppressive relations but is involved in wider public discourses from time to time acts as a satellite public sphere. (p. 448)

Squires concept of an enclaved counterpublic is a useful way to gain insight into how members of a social movement might act to change and construct their planned outward discourses.

Some recent research in rhetorical studies has looked at the potential of historical conservative counterpublics. In exploring the anti-suffrage movement, Maddux (2004) argues that the National Association Opposed to Woman Suffrage (NAOWS) underwent a discourse shift from speaking out against women’s suffrage to a far broader discourse that focused on maintaining the status quo and spreading fear of a larger social revolution. By resisting a change in societal norms and values—and operating through persuasive strategies—Maddux went on to classify the NAOWS as a conservative
counterpublic. Like the NAOWS, the Tea Party movement might be seen as a social
movement turned counterpublic by spreading fear of the Obama administrations plans to
“fundamentally transform America” (Galloway, 2007).

Categorizing conservative groups as counterpublics is problematic in that
most conceptions of counterpublics include criteria that the members of the counterpublic
be a marginalized group that has been excluded from dominant publics. From the
perspective of a critical scholar, analysis of a movement’s counterpublicity is an
important tool in exposing unseen and oppressive power structures of larger publics.
Asen (2009) cautions that treating counterpublic as a neutral term will cause the concept
to lose its critical purchase. To Asen a non-critical counterpublic could promote a
“dehistoricized perspective that fails to account for the ways in which relations of power
and symbolic and material resources influence the production, circulation, and reception
of discourse in the public sphere” (p. 265). In looking at the rise of conservative
Counterintelligentsia—in the form of conservative think tanks—Asen argues that
scholars cannot ignore the rise of conservative counterpublics, however, to retain a
critical edge they must also reflectively engage conservative claims of marginalization
and oppression. Although the Tea Party movement is far more populist and nebulous than
the ordered conservative think tanks Asen focused on, remaining reflexive and skeptical
will be critical in the exploration of the Tea Party movement’s publicity.

In this section, we have looked at the wide range of rhetorical perspectives
that arose out of studying social movements from the perspectives of the public sphere.
Important to the study at hand we looked at literature supporting the possibility right-
wing counterpublicity. In the next section, I will focus on the body of scholastic inquiries
of right-wing social movements. Most of the research presented on these movements stems from the leader-centric perspectives common in the 1950s era of movement studies. Although limited and not directly representative of the current study, this review does provide a historical example of how right-wing movements have evolved in the past.

**Social Movements of the Right**

Historically the studies of “conservative” social movements from rhetorical and communication perspectives have been limited. What exists tends to be leader-centric, with the movement covered as a backdrop if at all. Outside of the communication and rhetoric disciplines, some perspectives can be found in political science and sociology. Much of this existing body of research falls outside the scope and focus of this study; however, some of these perspectives are useful in conceptualizing conservative social movements. The following section proceeds in two parts. First, a conceptional definition of right-wing social movements will be constructed by drawing of the related sociological theory. Second, historical research of conservative movements, specifically that of the Goldwater movement will be summarized.

Lo (1982) looked at the modern trends—1970 to 1980—of right-wing social movements and constructed several definitions useful in framing research on the Tea Party movement. For Lo, a right-wing social movement can be defined as a “social movement whose stated goals are to maintain structures of order, status, honor, or traditional social differences or values” (p. 108). Lo goes on to argue that right-wing movements tend to appear in the form of extremist, conservative, or radical right categorizations. Extremist movements are those that focus on “intolerance, monism, moralism, and preoccupation with conspiracies” (p. 108). Conservative movements are
those that seek to maintain long-standing institutions and values. The radical right
movement seeks drastic changes to the status quo in order to enact right-wing principles.
It is important to consider that social movements have a tendency to be diverse in
membership, thus any of these perspectives might be found among members. In looking
at the Tea Party movement, a hybrid of conservative and radical right tendencies act to
define the movement. In one regard, the stated goals of the organization echo a return to
constitutionally limited government, clearly aligning with the conservative
categorization. Looking to the other goals, and the rhetoric of the membership, reveals
shared beliefs that the free markets and fiscal responsibility they seek have never truly
existed, and thus call for drastic changes to the status quo to achieve.

The Goldwater Movement

In 1964, Barry Goldwater made an attempt to win the presidency. Although
unsuccessful in achieving the office of Commander and Chief, he has been credited as the
man who transformed the American conservative movement—which was ultimately
realized in the presidency of Ronald Reagan (Grove, 1994). A deeper look at the
complexities and movement that followed Goldwater will provide insight into the inner-
workings of a conservative social movement.

Political analysts and scholars of the 1960s were perplexed by the selection of
Goldwater as the 1964 GOP candidate. Renowned political scientist Aaron Wildavsky
wrote, shortly after the 1964 election, that

the Goldwater phenomenon is the great mystery of American politics. His
nomination as presidential candidate by the Republican Party and his campaign for
election have profoundly challenged accepted theories of American politics. (1965,
p. 386)
Wildavsky goes on to explain that several factors, exhibited through the membership of the Goldwater movement, led Republicans to put forth such a conservative—and unelectable candidate.

The 1964 presidential election was an impossible campaign for the GOP. President Johnson, the successor of a martyred president, was popular with the grieving American people. Wildavsky (1965) argues that Republican elites spent time engaged in futile arguments over selecting a candidate who would lose by a lot or lose by a little. The result of this conundrum was a degree of political apathy from many conservatives as the election season approached. What mystified political scholars at the time was the wave of support that was commanded by Barry Goldwater that ultimately won him the California primary and the GOP ticket. In a time of relative political apathy, Goldwater’s candidacy awoke a dormant conservative populace and motivated them to take action in support of his campaign. To further understand Goldwater’s candidacy and unexpected support it becomes necessary to examine his rhetorical legacy leading up to the 1964 election.

In his time as a US Senator and particularly in the four years leading up to the 1964 election, Barry Goldwater used a rhetoric of “rugged individualism” to build “an amateur political machine” that delivered him the GOP nomination (Hammerback, 1972, p. 176). By uniting different types of conservatives—college Republicans, conservative coalition members, and Americans who were upset with the growing size of reach of the federal government—Goldwater was able to create a base that was active and overcame the conservative political apathy of the day. The challenge Goldwater faced was uniting these very different threads of conservatism under a single conservative ideology. Hammerback (1999) argues that Goldwater accomplished this task through his rhetoric.
Hammerback traces Goldwater’s rhetorical legacy to his ability to merge his own persona with his right-wing ideology. The result was Goldwater: the rugged individualist. When Goldwater spoke to his audience, he often preached the values of rugged individualism. As the idealized example of what a rugged individualist should be all his supporters needed to do was adopt his persona.

As they took on characteristics of the rugged individualist, the Arizona Senator guided their rhetorical reconstitution by telling them who to be and how to act. To adopt Goldwater’s version of them, they needed only to embrace the qualities displayed by their leader and implied in his ideology. Thus Goldwater’s substantive message and personae worked together reciprocally to establish deep, multiple, and overlapping layers of identification. (Hammerback, 1999, p. 329)

This shared and overlapping identification with Goldwater’s persona acted as the glue that bound the diverse membership of his following together.

Goldwater’s ideology broke from mainstream conservative viewpoints of the day. In an era where many on the right were moving towards the center, Goldwater came out strongly for individual liberty, fiscal responsibility, free enterprise, and a hawkish foreign policy (Goldberg, 1995). Though Goldwater’s election campaign ended in defeat, the movement of followers he spawned lived on. The Goldwater movement is often credited with igniting the conservative awakening that led to the election and two term presidency of Ronald Reagan (Ribuffo, 1994).

Although The Tea Party movement is significantly different from the Goldwater movement in that it is not a leader centered-movement, there are two key parallels that can be drawn. First, the rhetoric of Goldwater activated an apathetic conservative faction of the American public and motivated them to be involved in the democratic process. Although, the rhetorics of the Tea Party do not stem from a single
given leader, their acts of protest and action serve the same result: awakening conservative activists. Second, Goldwater, and his followers, desired to leave social issues out of conservative politics. Goldwater was a strict constitutionalist and felt social issues such as abortion should never be controlled by the government. Instead he and his followers promoted limited government, fiscal responsibility and free enterprise. These core tenants, and the absence of social issues, mirrors almost identically the three core values and rules of the Tea Party movement.

In this chapter, three major areas of scholarship critical to understanding the current study were reviewed. First, the historical retelling of the Tea Party movement’s origin added needed context to this study. Second, theories of socialization and assimilation were reviewed. Last, an analytical toolkit was constructed from the body of rhetorical social movement scholarship. The next chapter proceeds with a discussion of the methodologies used to conduct this stud
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The following chapter contains a detailed description of this project’s methodological approach. In the past, the study of right wing groups has been a problematic endeavor. There are those on the right who see members of the academy as left-wing zealots intent on indoctrinating the minds of the young (Horowitz, 2006). As a result of this mistrust, much of the research that has been performed on right wing groups has faced problems of access, accuracy, and researcher bias. This inquiry seeks to approach the study of the Tea Party movement in a way that avoids these pitfalls and gains access to insights not found in other works. In the spirit of an emergent focus of study, the following section will start with an explanation of how the current study came to be. Following that discussion, I will then present evidence supporting the use of a methodological triangulation that draws on ethnography and semi-structured interviews. From there, this chapter will explain, in detail, the steps used in conducting this study.

General Considerations

When I first approached this study, I wanted to get a representation of the Tea Party movement that was deeper and more complex than I had seen demonstrated in traditional approaches to academic research—surveys and interviews. When I began preliminary investigations of the Tea Party I discovered that there were several access
barriers surrounding the potential sites of discovery. In my initial exploration of the Web presence held by Tea Party groups I discovered that the social network sites of most regional Tea Party groups were hosted on closed platforms. This made it difficult to understand what, where, or even why Tea Party groups would be engaged in activities.

In an attempt to solve some of my problems of access and capture the highly naturalistic portrait of the lived experience I had been looking for, I turned to two examples of ethnographic scholarship to provide some direction. First was Goodall’s (2000) methodological style of inquiry associated with writing the “new ethnography.” In Goodall’s approach the researcher focused on the construction of “creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to academic and public audiences” (Goodall, 2000, p. 9). From this perspective, I was able to conceptualize a research design that allowed me to overcome some barriers by approaching research as the product of my own lived experience. The goal then became finding a way to write myself into the lived experience of the Tea Party membership.

Looking for a model of how this might be accomplished I turned to my second source of methodological inspiration: Justus’s (2009) investigation of the Minuteman Civil Defense Corps (MCDC). In Justus’s research design he joined and actively participated in the activities and advocacy of the MCDC. From this inside perspective, he was able to gain access to the rhetoric and communicative practices of the MCDC. Justus’s success with the MCDC led me to believe that a similar approach might be successful into gaining a

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1 Many modern social movements utilize open social networking platforms. For example the “I stand with Planned Parenthood” movement uses a combination of Facebook Pages (Planned Parenthood page), YouTube channels (Planned Parenthood’s channel), and Twitter accounts (PPact) to connect with supporters. All of these technologies are open to anyone who wishes to view them. The closed platforms, used by the regional groups of the Tea Party movement, restrict access to members of the Tea Party.
meaningful insight into the Tea Party movement. In the following section, I will briefly
describe the history of this type of inquiry and then proceed to explain each of the
components of my research design.

Jack Douglas (1976) offered a unique approach to organizational inquiry
through a process he referred to as investigative social science. Douglas argued that often
gatekeepers in organizations prevented known researchers from ever getting backstage.
To mitigate the phenomena, Douglas proposed the necessity of using covert strategies to
gain access. Among these strategies were the use of undercover secret identities and
getting potential sources intoxicated so they might be more likely to spill information.
Douglas’s whatever means necessary approach is highly problematic from an ethical
standpoint. It is important to remember that in the pursuit of truths we must aspire to do
no harm. As argued by Angrosino and Perez (2005), the ways in which we conduct
ourselves as students of humanity matter and the results of our inquiries never justify the
use of unethical means to acquire them.

In addition to the ethical problems, Douglas’s (1976) approach also presents
serious complications concerning the authenticity and genuineness of the study.
Conducting research from false and malicious perspectives stands to only taint and bias
that which is discovered. Central to all scholarly research is the search for truth. As
argued by Goodall (2000) the scholars purpose is to enter the life-world open to all
possibilities. Inherent in Douglas’s methodology was the assumption that those under
study were already guilty of doing wrong and the researcher had to do whatever was
necessary to prove it. Operating from a perspective such as this prevents the researcher from grasping the complex and multifaceted realities of those they study.

Facing the same problems of access, but not wanting to cross into the ethical no-man’s-land of Douglas (1976), other scholars pioneered alternative means to conduct investigative social research. One method employed by many ethnographers in the early 1990s was to write about their own lived experience in academically interesting settings and situations. Ronai (1992; 1995; 1998) exemplifies this in her auto-ethnographic research documenting her own experiences working as an exotic dancer. Other examples of this method of research include Conquergood’s (1992) research on gang life in Chicago and Goodall’s (1994) lived experience as an organizational communication consultant. This method of conducting research is far more ethical and genuine than that of Douglas, however, it is limited to populations and settings that the researchers previous lived experience has given them access to.

Recently scholars have sought to capture the rich experience of the aforementioned methods while studying groups with which they had little to no previous involvement. In this new line of research, scholars choose to join and actively participate in the groups, organizations, communities, or settings they wish to study. In the particular case of organizations and groups, the scholar chooses to become an insider and actively advocates alongside the other members of the organization. It is from this perspective and performance of identity that they are able to offer insights into the lived experiences of a specific population. Examples of this style of research include Justus’s (2009) research

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2 It is worth noting that much of Douglas’s research was focused on organizations and individuals that had been shown on multiple occasions to be guilty of corruption and other criminal activities.
which drove him to join and advocate on behalf of the Arizona Minutemen Defense corps
and Hess’s (in press) study of the DanceSafe organization that led him into the clubs and
parties of Arizona’s rave culture. It is this model of investigative social research that I use
as the foundations of my own methodological approach.

The Method

In the Spring 2010 I entered the field to conduct an auto-ethnographic pilot
study of a single regional Tea Party group. In the beginning, it was important that the
research took on an emergent focus. I wanted to allow my socialization into the group to
be as natural as possible. My hope was that in an attempt to go native, I would be
exposed to a genuine impression of the Tea Party movement. That is, however, not to say
that I completely left myself behind. Ethnography had been described as the art of
“[entering] the field with an open mind, not with an empty head” (Fetterman, 2010, p. 1).
While allowing myself to drift into the communicative actions of the group, I brought my
scholar self along for the ride. After each excursion into the field, I wrote field notes—to
record thick description of the events (Geertz, 1973)—and allowed my lived experience
to guide my research focus. This early exploration of the Tea Party movement led me
down three emergent paths of scholarship: social movement rhetoric, theories of
counterpublicity, and theories of organizational socialization and assimilation. After
exploring the literature of these three areas I proposed and executed the current study
which was more methodologically complex and focused than the pilot study.

In my approach, I combine ethnographic means of data collection with
qualitative semi-structured interviews in order to construct rhetorical artifacts
representative of the Tea Party movement. I then draw upon theoretical standpoints found in the scholarship of the communication and rhetoric disciplines to perform analysis. In a broad sense this type of research design fits into the category of investigative social research, however, the combinations of ethnographic data collection and rhetorical analysis lend more to the related methodology of critical-rhetorical ethnography. This section proceeds by discussing each of the aforementioned data collection methods in order to offer a coherent picture of how each was used to build artifacts representative of the Tea Party movement.

**Ethnographic Data**

I sat awkwardly in the sticky vinyl booth at my first Tea Party meeting. I’d been there for about an hour and could not help but think that I was in over my head. The current speaker finished up an announcement and handed off the microphone to a very large middle-aged man.

There are liberal infiltrators among us! School teachers such as Jason Levin may be sitting next to you right now. They call us homophobes and racists because they know they can’t argue with us on the issues. They are here and want us to fail. We cannot let them!

The first week of my pilot study of the Tea Party Patriots was complicated by an Oregon school teacher named Jason Levin. Levin (2010) had created a website and discussion board encouraging “progressives” to go out and “crash” Tea Party meetings and protests. Once inside, Jason Levin encouraged them to do whatever possible to discredit the movement, including the use of racial and homophobic slurs at rallies. This story and accompanied critiques were hot topics on conservative news outlets, Tea Party meetings, and online Tea Party social networks. Conservative media outlets—talk radio and Fox News—had a field day over Levin’s actions. Rush Limbaugh lamented the

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3 A methodological name I borrow from Hess (in press).
liberal cowards who were trying to silence the Tea Party movement. Sean Hannity called for Tea Party members to remain vigilant and wary of obvious liberal newcomers. Glenn Beck wept.

At the time of my pilot study, the backlash to Jason Levin’s movement was a significant source of personal anxiety. I remember standing by my car at my first meeting, nervous and full of second thoughts. A middle-aged man approached me and asked if this was the Tea Party meeting. I said “yes.” He then asked for my help to carry some stuff inside. I agreed. To this day I’m not sure if I would have gone in if he had not asked for my help.

The methodological approach of my study draws heavily on Hess’s (in press) approach of critical-rhetorical ethnography. Hess proposes scholars embody and enact the advocacy of the groups they study. Hess argues that the critical-rhetorical ethnographer should “engage in a vernacular organization’s ideals and events, traveling with them to picket, protest, petition, or perform” (p. 4). Coupled with a rhetorical approach of inquiry into advocacy, argumentation, and deliberation, this style of research allows qualitative and rhetorical traditions to act in a complementary manner. Empowered with the first-hand knowledge, understanding, and experience of a group’s vernacular advocacy, the critical-rhetorical ethnographer is able to provide deep insights into the composition of a given population.

Since my initial entrance into the Tea Party movement, in April of 2010, I have maintained various levels of active membership in the organization (Adler & Adler, 1987). To date I have attended 32 weekly meetings—at seven different regional groups, nine rallies, worked booths at two gun shows, and participated in five weekend precinct
walks. I have also frequently participated on five regional and two national Tea Party social network sites. Inside these regional groups, I am a Tea Party Patriot. Although my role as a scholar conducting research on the Tea Party is not something I advertise,\(^4\) I do not hide the fact that I am a graduate student. I am also known to discuss my scholastic interest in the Tea Party with other members when the opportunity arises.

The wide variety of activities I took part in as a Tea Party Patriot have led me to develop several strategies for documenting my experiences. Among the most useful tools in my ethnographic arsenal is my Apple iPhone. A strange development in modern American society is the invisibility of our electronic devices. The same nonverbal behaviors that are perceived as making a phone call or sending a text message can be used to make audio and written field notes on a smart phone. In the past scratch notes have been a staple of the ethnographer. These observations jotted down on napkins, receipts, and other available means, served as useful reminders of significant events in the field (Sanjek, 1990). My use of smart phone technology allows me to take scratch notes to a more advanced level. As a “geekier” Tea Party Patriot, I often have my phone out during meetings.\(^5\) Instead of writing down notes in the open, I am able to type them up in my iPhone “notebook” app. If something of critical importance takes place that involves a deeper description, I can step outside to make a “phone call” and record a quick audio message of the event.

\(^4\) The Tea Party groups I have associated tend to be very homogenous in demographics, consisting mainly of retired white people. In what I perceive to be an insecurity based on a lack of diversity, young student members are showcased and encouraged to take on very public leadership roles different from the rest of the membership. I minimized my role as a student to prevent becoming separated from the bulk of the membership.

\(^5\) I once even used the “constitution” app on a precinct walk when my partner had forgotten his pocket version at home.
As I participated in the performance of Tea Party Patriot, I found myself interacting with a wide assortment of organizational texts. Like other modern movements, the Tea Party exists as a multi-textual organization. At most meetings and events there is a table set up with written materials for all those interested to take. To date I have collected an assortment of published books, pamphlets, DVDs, written opinions of candidates, editorials, and newsletters. In my discussions with other Tea Party Patriots, I have observed several members blame the apparent rise of progressivism on the control of information by the left. Members are encouraged to create and contribute to a body of counter-information that can be handed out to fellow members and other interested parties at protests, meetings, and other events.

In addition to the physical texts, my participation in the Tea Party movement also led me to discover and create an assortment of digital texts. Examples of this include: interactions posted on social networks, individual member blog posts, and smart phone applications. What is unique about the digital texts of the Tea Party movement is that they represent closed or restricted digital channels. Requests to join social network groups are moderated by existing members. Subversives who manage to get inside and post liberal or otherwise dissenting views are banned. In essence, while they are open to public consumption, the digital texts of the Tea Party movement are constructed in protective enclaves. This collection of texts discovered through my Tea Party activities is ethnographically linked to my lived experience inside the Tea Party. Including these texts as part of the data collection process provides insights into the ways Tea Party discourses

6 Most Tea Party regional groups utilize the “ning.com” platform to create their own social networks. As a part of this platform all members who join the network are given a personal profile page, a blog, and access to the sites newsgroups and discussion boards.
actually develop. Additionally the inclusion of this textual layer gets at the larger and more complex nature of the Tea Party movement.

**Semi-Structured Interviewing**

In addition to ethnographic collection of data, this research design also includes a small number of semi-structured interviews. Although participant observation offers me a naturalistic chance to engage and observe the Tea Party, interviewing provides a different kind of focus with Tea Party Patriots. Through interviews an ethnographer is able to acquire “firsthand and immediate interpretive accounts of how [a] message is received” (Hess, in press, p. 27). Further, these direct interpretive accounts provide a means for the ethnographer to double check the accuracy of observational data and account for bias (Thomas, 1992).

The use of interviews has long been a staple in both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection (Babbie, 2006). Qualitative interviews are particularly useful in providing researchers with the tools needed to discover complexities and alternate interpretations of events and phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). The use of interviews also gives researchers the ability to selectively travel into the lived experience of their participants.

The qualitative interview is an event in which one person (the interviewer) encourages others to freely articulate their interests and experiences. Its ability to travel deeply and broadly into subjective realities has made the interview a preeminent method and communication and other social sciences. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 170)

In addition to providing insight into the subjective realities of participants, interviews also uniquely equip the researcher with the ability to pursue emergent paths of inquiry. Kvale (1996) argues that during the qualitative interview researchers can choose to
diverge from their interview guide and pursue emergent themes along the way. This gives the researcher the ability to use interviews as a “construction site of knowledge” building bridges from one question and topic to the next (p. 2).

Rhetorical Analysis

The analysis chapter of this thesis draws from a broad rhetorical framework in order to construct a toolkit useful in conducting a rigorous analysis of emergent categories. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), good ethnography is that which combines rigorous data collection methods, represented in *emic* perspectives, with theoretically grounded analysis of the *etic* perspective. When researchers take the *emic* perspective, the communicative phenomena observed are explained through the native meanings of the culture that constructed them. From the *etic* perspective, meanings of communicative phenomena are derived from the bodies of disciplinary knowledge and theory. The triangulation of ethnographic data collection and semi-structured interviews draws deeply on the *emic* perspective. By combining this rich set of data and cultural understanding with the theory-based tools of rhetorical inquiry, a balance between *etic* and *emic* perspectives can be achieved. Here I propose a combination of rhetorical methodologies—specifically McKerrow’s (1989) critical rhetoric and Hess’s critical-rhetorical ethnography (in press)—and rhetorical/communication theories on social movements, publics, and socialization and assimilation.

McKerrow’s (1989) critical rhetoric calls on rhetorical critics to challenge traditional approaches to criticism. In McKerrow’s approach rhetorical analysis is used to examine the “dimensions of domination and freedom” and “seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power” (p. 91). This (re)conceptualization of rhetoric redefines criticism
as an orientation towards critical practice instead of a method for analysis. Drawing on Foucault’s theories of power and domination, McKerrow argues that a critical-rhetorical critic seeks to discover how rhetorical artifacts come to be. More specifically the critical-rhetorical critic seeks to shine light on dominant discourses—both explicit and hegemonic—and address the power they have in the construction of discursive formations. In the past, rhetorical analysis of discourse sought to discover the truth of the rhetoric. The critical turn, in McKerrow’s approach, is represented in a focus on how discourse might legitimize hegemonic groups, and in doing so establishes the means to emancipate those who are dominated.

Instead of offering a methodological procedure, McKerrow (1989) saw critical rhetoric as a means to shape the perspective of the critic and her interaction with surroundings. In the orientation of critical rhetoric the critic must undertake a major (re)conceptualization of the “object of study” (p. 100). Instead of looking at texts as autonomous objects of meaning, texts can be seen as fragments of much larger discursive formations. The implication of this shift is that a single text, in a single discrete situation, can never reveal—in totality—the persuasiveness of a given phenomenon. Rather, a text acts as a message fragment that circulates through a given culture combining with a plethora of other fragmented messages. Instead of acting as an interpreter of textual fragments the critic takes on the role of the “inventor” and combines fragments in order
to construct texts. This process can be further understood and enhanced when it is incorporated into the method of critical-rhetorical ethnography.

Hess (in press) expands on McKerrow (1989) in his proposal for critical-rhetorical ethnography. Hess found the practice of simply witnessing the creation of rhetorical texts an insufficient means of inquiry. Hess, instead, proposes a repositioning of the critic as active advocate of the organization being studied. This practice leads to a convergence of rhetorical invention and the critic’s acts of advocacy. The result of this process is that the ethnographer/critic’s lived experience becomes a unique site of discovery for the construction of rhetorical texts. In the course of this study I embodied the role of ethnographer/critic and became an advocate for the Tea Party and used that position to reflect, gather, and take part in the creation of texts for analysis.

Analysis of data in a project such as this is a complex process. The multi-textual nature of the Tea Party movement leaves the researcher swimming in a pool of data. Faced with a body of data that included field notes, audio logs, e-mail messages, organizational texts, chat transcriptions, forum posts, YouTube videos, and interview transcripts, I chose to embody the position of critical rhetorician engaged in the invention of the text of analysis. McKerrow (1989) claims that “the reversal of ‘public address’ to ‘discourse which addresses publics’ places the critic in the role of ‘inventor’ ” (p. 101). As a member of the Tea Party movement, I became an active creator of rhetorical texts. From conversations at meetings, rallies, and precinct walks, I took the textual fragments of my lived experience as a Tea Party Patriot and invented my own Tea Party discourses.

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7 In my case this was doubly true. As a Tea Party Patriot I actively participated in the invention of Tea Party rhetorical acts. As a rhetorical critic, using McKerrow’s (1989) critical rhetoric framework, I was combining the textual fragments of my lived ethnographic experience to create the artifacts of analysis.
In my performance as a Tea Party Patriot I became an “advocate for an interpretation of the collected fragments” (p. 108). Drawing on Hess’s (in press) model of a critical-rhetorical ethnography, I acted to situate myself amongst the vernacular of the Tea Party. I sought to embody praxis and perform advocacy. In performing the part, I invented discourses as a means of making sense of my position. An analysis of my own assimilation and vernacular experience in the Tea Party movement becomes a rhetorical artifact worthy of analysis.

The actual analysis of data took place in two parts. First textual fragments were combined—through the aforementioned process—in a thematic fashion to create rhetorical texts representative of different aspects of the Tea Party movement. Second, rhetorical and communication theories were then used to probe deeper into the communicative behaviors exhibited by the Tea Party movement in the textual artifacts.

In this chapter, we looked at how ethnographic and qualitative means of data collection were combined with a rhetorical method of artifact analysis. McKerrow’s (1989) critical-rhetorical framework was operationalized in a way that empowered me as the critic—guided by my ethnographic experience as a Tea Party Patriot—to engage in the process of invention and construct textual artifacts of the Tea Party movement’s rhetoric. In the next chapter, this process will be demonstrated through the construction and analysis of three thematic categories representative of textual fragments found in the study of the Tea Party movement.

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8 Several themes presented themselves over the course of fieldwork, however, the development of social movement rhetoric, counterpublicity, and assimilation/socialization practices were the most prevalent and interesting in terms of this study.
CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

The following chapter presents an analysis of the communicative practices of the Tea Party movement. To accomplish this I draw from McKerrow’s (1989) claim that “the reversal of ‘public address’ to ‘discourse which addresses publics’ places the critic in the role of ‘inventor’” (p. 101). In the year, I spent as a member of the Tea Party movement I became an active inventor of rhetorical acts and textual fragments. Drawing on the interactions I participated in at meetings, rallies, precinct walks, semi-structured interviews, and the vast variety of computer-mediated means; I took the textual fragments of my own lived experience as a Tea Party Patriot and invented artifacts representative of the Tea Party movement. In my performance as a Tea Party Patriot, I became an “advocate for an interpretation of the collected fragments” (p. 108). Further, by drawing on Hess’s (in press) model of a critical-rhetorical ethnography, I acted to situate myself amongst the vernacular of the Tea Party. I sought to embody praxis and perform advocacy. In performing the part, I invented discourses as a means of making sense of my position. The result of this endeavor empowered me, as the critic, to use my past history of invention in the field to conduct the invention of artifacts—created from the textual fragments gathered in data collection.

This analysis looks at three thematic categories constructed from my first-hand experience as a Tea Party Patriot. In the first category, we follow the path of a new
Tea Party Patriot by reliving my own assimilation and vernacular experiences in the Tea Party movement. Insights gained into ways assimilation is facilitated in the Tea Party movement will help to address the first research question. In the second category, we will retreat deep into the heart of Tea Party culture and explore the enclaved nature of Tea Party meetings. Through this we inform the second research question by gaining insights into how discourses are constructed. In the final category, we will search for answers related the third research question through an analysis of the evolution and rhetorical development of the Tea Party as a social movement.

Socialization and Assimilation

The ability to recruit, assimilate, and socialize new members is a critical component to the longevity of the Tea Party movement. In the following section, several aspects and phenomena relevant to member assimilation and socialization will be described and analyzed. This process proceeds in three steps. The first step will explore the composition of Tea Party orientation sessions. The second step will look at the setup and structure of Tea Party meetings. The last step chronicles my own assimilation from outsider to active member of the Tea Party movement.

New Member Orientation

In March of 2010, I became an active member of a regional Tea Party group. The group met three to four times a month in the evening. Prior to entering the field, I had interacted with several members of the group on a private social networking platform. After signing up and posting a profile picture, I received a series of welcome
messages from members of the organization. A woman named Candy\(^1\) messaged me and identified herself as the person in charge of “prospective member orientation.” Through several exchanges, on the social network’s private messaging system, I made inquiries about what I might expect at my first meeting. Candy was prompt and friendly in her feedback. “We hold new member orientation at 6 pm before every meeting. Since you have never attended our meetings before you are highly encouraged to come to one of these sessions.” Ready to get into the field, I replied back that I would see her at the next meeting.

Theories of computer-mediated communication suggest that it may be easier for people to establish relationships through the use of single channel based communication. Walther’s (1993) social information processing theory argues that individuals communicating through mediated means—text or voice channels—are able to overcome interaction barriers that might prevent them from initiating face-to-face interaction. The Tea Party’s use of social networking technology to meet and encourage interaction online takes advantage of this phenomena and drives individuals to actual meetings and events.\(^2\)

\(^1\) A pseudonym. All names used in this study have been replaced with fictitious ones to protect the identities of those individuals referenced. The same protections are in place for specific locations and names of regional groups.

\(^2\) Over the course of my research I have joined six regional social networks. Each new membership was accompanied by a message from an “individual in charge of new members” welcoming me to the group and inviting further interaction.
In addition to correspondence with Candy—whom I later learned held a leadership role in the “core group”\(^3\)—I also received several messages posted on the “wall”\(^4\) of my social networking profile. Several members welcomed me and repeated the message that they looked forward to meeting me at the next meeting. One individual—also in an unofficial leadership role—posted a comment on my wall with the “5 Steps for New Patriots”:

1. Join Our Mailing List that is located in the upper left corner of the website on the HOME tab.
2. Read About Us located on the ABOUT US tab.
3. Attend a meeting or event. Check out the Events Calendar located on the EVENTS let us know what you are interested in.
4. Get Involved in a Watchdog Group. Local, State, Federal, etc.
5. Wear Tea Party shirts, hats & buttons to encourage interaction.

Computer-mediated comments such as this can be seen to serve a dual purpose. First, these messages can assist in enhancing the relational development between new and existing members of the Tea Party. This process is accomplished through a type of computer-mediated uncertainty reduction. New members are given a preview of who the other members of the organization are and what rules they need to follow should they choose to assimilate into the organization. Messages such as the “5 steps” give new members the tools to further reduce uncertainty and gain information about the organization through low risk means. Second, since these messages are posted publicly on the group’s social network site, existing members are able to view them. This process

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\(^3\) For much of the time I participated in the Tea Party there was no official leadership. In their respective regional groups, members volunteer to help run meetings. Unofficially, the group of individuals who founded the regional group are the ones who most often run the weekly meetings. In some regions, this group of unofficial leaders is referred to as the “core group.”

\(^4\) A “wall” is a text based message space visible to all members of this private social network.
of viewing welcome messages helps to reinforce the socialization of existing members by initiating a call back to their original assimilation into the organization.⁵

When I showed up for my orientation session I was given a name-tag, an information pamphlet, and a pocket copy of the United States Constitution. The middle-aged woman, who was working the door, directed me to a table where the new member orientation meeting was about to start. I sat down with a group of men and women who were all white and of retirement age. A middle-aged women, whom I recognized from her online profile to be Candy walked up and greeted us.

I just want to take a moment to welcome you all to our new member orientation meeting. Our group is called the Tea Party Patriots, and we are a local group connected to a larger network of state and national organizations. Our group has three core values that drive all of our decisions, and those three values are constitutionally limited government, free markets, and fiscal responsibility. While we do share similar views on social issues, our group has made a conscious choice to set those aside and focus on the three core values.

Candy went on to explain that if we were interested in advocating some social issues then we should find some other group. She referenced examples of how members posting anti-abortion messages on the web page had been banned from doing so and eventually—after repeated warnings—been removed from the online social network.

The foundational theories of organizational socialization and assimilation differentiate between formal and informal tactics (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The orientation session I was participating in was a kind of formal tactic. In the dialog I observed, the core values of the group were clearly articulated and shared with newcomers. This kind of formal interaction can help to create a common culture of

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⁵ Over the course of the study, I found the interactions on the social network to be a constant reminder of the rules, norms, and cultural values of the Tea Party Patriots.
shared values among members of an organization (Hess, 1993). For the Tea Party Patriots, these orientations created a common connection between the members of the regional group, as well as connecting members to the shared values of a larger national network.

After setting the ground rules, Candy proceeded to tell us the history of this regional group’s formation. She said,

The Tea Party has really become my baby. At the first protest last year we all exchanged e-mail addresses. One gentleman, whom I’ve never heard from since, compiled a list of names and e-mailed us all the following week. On May 5th 2009 we had our first official meeting and have been doing so ever since.

Candy continued on to document some major organizational achievements of the Tea Party Patriots including chartering a bus to Sacramento to protest global warming legislation, running a highly popular booth at the state fair, and holding over thirty “very successful” street-side protests. At this point Candy asked us if we had seen them in action around town. When it came my turn to talk I noted that while I had not seen them in action yet, I had attended a “Tax Day Tea Party” in San Jose the previous April and had a similar experience to hers.

Candy’s historical retelling of the formation and growth of the local regional group is rhetorically interesting for two reasons. First, the narrative of the movement’s history helps new members to understand what Griffin (1952) described as the inception phase of a social movement. Organizations that explain the history, key figures, ways to excel, goals, shared values, organizational specific language, and organizational politics to new members have been found to have much higher levels of successful assimilation of new members (Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994). Second, through
a retelling of the group’s formation, and attempts to connect new members to the past through casual observations, Candy can be seen as facilitating the creation of shared ideology. In a study focused on the assimilation and creation of shared ideology in Alcoholics Anonymous programs, Kassel and Wagner (1993) found that “the strength of ideological ties to a group are positively correlated with successful affiliation with [a] group” (p. 230). Finding ways to ideologically tie new members to the movement’s past serves as a powerful example of a textual fragment being used to bind new and prospective members to the group.

At the conclusion of the group’s history, many of the new people—myself included—attempted to write themselves into the history of the Tea Party. I elaborated on my attendance and things that had happened during the San Jose Tea Party on the first national tax day protests the previous year. Other members shared stories about attending Tea Parties too. One woman spoke of honking a her horn as she passed protestors on a street corner. Another woman spoke of feeling supportive of the Tea Party as she watched the Fox News coverage of the April 15, 2009, protests. As the stories continued Candy chimed in with funny stories that had occurred during protests and other events.

The sharing of stories and rewriting of personal histories is an important component of becoming part of the Tea Party. Ending the orientation session informally through the sharing of stories left me feeling more comfortable and relaxed among the other Tea Party members. Faces that had started as hard and cold now seemed warm and open to further interaction. I felt like I was part of something.

Brown (1985) argues that the specific content of stories during the first few months in a new organization functions to socialize new members in a variety of different
ways. By telling new members stories of past organizational events, people, and challenges; new members are able to construct an idea of what life in the organization is like. Additionally, specific stories that express morals and organizational values can serve to motivate individuals to excel inside the organization. Barge and Schlueter (2004) also looked at the different kinds of stories organizational members were able to recall from their time as newcomers. The study revealed that organizational members often recalled stories about unwritten rules of the organization, the dynamics of organizational politics, team-centered metaphors, the value of new members, and the importance of communicating with other organizational members. Barge and Schlueter (2004) theorize that these common stories facilitated organizational assimilation by encouraging individuals to fit into preexisting organizational patterns. This research seems to suggest that by ending orientation sessions with the sharing of stories, the Tea Party Patriots act to further expedite the assimilation and socialization of new members.

In the weeks that followed my orientation meeting, I chose to show up early and observe other new members as they also went through orientation meetings. It was during these observations that I realized that existing Tea Party members would sit in on these meetings as if they were new to the group. I later discovered that these particular undercover existing members were part of the original group that formed shortly after the April 15, 2009 “Tax Day Tea Party.” Some past research has shown that increased interaction with existing members of an organization tends to facilitate a much quicker rate of socialization than traditional tactics do alone (Allen & Meyer, 1990a; Reichers, 1987). It has been theorized that organizational newcomers are likely to form interpersonal relationships with individuals who are existing members of an organization.
If those individuals are highly invested in the organization, the newcomer is likely to assimilate as a means of reducing uncertainty of his role and function in the organization (Baker, 1995). McKerrow’s (1989) third principle of praxis calls on the critic to look at symbolic interaction in a way that is more doxastic, acting to shape an individuals’ perception of social reality. The tactic to place organizational veterans alongside potential members acts as covert means to adapt the social reality of newcomers to that of dominant organizational ideologies.

The Tea Party Meeting

The start of a Tea Party meeting is very ritualized. Although the six different groups I interacted with differed in some respects—the overall structure is very similar. When you first arrive at a Tea Party meeting you are usually greeted at the door by another Tea Party Patriot. This individual welcomes you to the meeting and gives you a name tag. If it is your first meeting, a name tag is written up and placed in an empty badge holder. A permanent one will be made for you the following week. You make your way through the crowded room to a table where coffee and snacks have been placed. You help yourself to a blueberry scone and a cup of coffee. You then make your way to an open seat at a table in the middle of the room. Within moments of seven o’clock—the scheduled start of the meeting—a middle-aged white woman walks in the middle of the room, picks up a microphone, and begins the meeting. With a smile on her face she quiets the room and welcomes everyone to the meeting.

One of the first things the Tea Party Patriot running the meeting does is read off the text of a standardized disclamer.
We are a grassroots nonpartisan group of citizens who believe in the core values of constitutionally limited government, fiscal responsibility, and free markets. While we all share common beliefs and concerns regarding various social issues, our group has intentionally chosen to limit our focus to our core values. These core values direct all of our goals and decisions. The Tea Party Patriots schedule as many guest speakers as are able and are willing to meet with us to discuss their candidacy or issues. Questions, answers, statements, or testimonies offered by individuals during this time do not necessarily reflect the views of the Tea Party as a group. It is up to you to be an informed voter and decide who is worthy of your vote or the position you may take on an issue.

Disclaimers such as this act to construct the Tea Party meeting as a more formal setting. Theories of organizational socialization strategies have shown that when individuals are placed into more formal environments they are more likely to act in accordance to the rules and norms of said environment (Allen & Meyer, 1990a). Something as innocuous as reading this message every week acts to reinforce the norms of the organization.

Further analysis of the Tea Party Patriots’ disclaimer statement illuminates several strategic means through which the Tea Party socializes members to the values and norms of the Tea Party culture. First, the statement uses inclusive language, “We are a grassroots nonpartisan group...” Inclusive language such as this can be seen as a subtle example of an informal socialization tactic. Second, the repetition of the three core values establishes the most important rules guiding conduct and discourses that are to take place. Third, the language surrounding the restriction on social issues hints at the unspoken social conservative nature of Tea Party culture. “While we all share common beliefs and concerns regarding various social issues...” What can be seen here is an underlying agreement that although it is not appropriate to openly discuss socially conservative issues, all members of the Tea Party do indeed share those concerns. Further anecdotal
evidence emerges when you look at the reading of the statement from week to week. When the statement is read each week it is done so verbatim and does not change, regardless of who the speaker is; however, this is not the case when the reader gets to the point where he or she discusses the limitation of social issues. Over the course of my research I discovered this part of the statement was the most elaborated on. Consider the following variation from a meeting in August of 2010.

Now if anybody has any social issues that are of particular importance to them, and I know that we all have them and that they are near and dear to our hearts, but we do feel that sticking to the three core values is broad enough and it covers a lot in that area. So on the social issues you may have an opinion but we do not want to push it. All right? You may also notice that we do not do any praying or anything like that. There are other right-wing groups that do, but we figure that you all have your churches and it is best to pray there. When we are here we are just a bunch of rabble-rousers.

As illustrated by this example, and as evidenced in my own observations of many other meetings, the facilitators of the meetings construct the rule against discussing social issues in a way where the social conservatism of the membership is framed as a truism while allowing the Tea Party to masquerade as an outwardly secular movement. During the course of my study I have yet to bear witness to a discussion or observed any rhetoric suggesting that a member may only believe in the three core values and have alternative perspectives on social issues. It is my belief, however, that the part of the statement that reads “... our group has intentionally chosen to limit our focus...” suggests that Tea Party rhetorics are perceived to be more effective when framed as fiscally conservative libertarian rhetorics and not the socially conservative perspectives often associated with the right.

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6 Turning down invitations to attend church with fellow Tea Party members has been one of the most constant reoccurring conversations during my study.
After the reading of the disclaimer statement the leader of meeting then asks that “all gentlemen please remove their hats,” and then leads us in the pledge of allegiance. After the conclusion of the pledge all veterans of foreign wars are asked to stand and be honored. Much of the discourse of the Tea Party can be seen to support the construction of members as American patriots. Activities such as pledging allegiance to the flag and honoring veterans helps to assimilate members into a patriotic archetype. A Tea Party Patriot loves his flag and his country. He will fight to protect it. We might also be our own city state islands but in a panhellensitic way we are all American Patriots at the Tea Party.

**Becoming Assimilated**

Balancing the identities of student, teacher, scholar, and Tea Party Patriot is a difficult undertaking. Beyond the typical challenges of graduate school, my involvement in the Tea Party forced me to face some complicated identity issues as I underwent simultaneous assimilation into the academy and the Tea Party. In the early months of my study I often felt myself at odds with my divergent identities. I made what I documented in my field notes as mistakes. One day after a meeting I wore my Tea Party name badge to the Starbucks where I often read and studied for my graduate seminars. On another occasion I bumped into three of my public speaking students while wearing a Tea Party name badge.

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7 There is a preponderance of gendered language at Tea Party meetings. This is somewhat ironic in that Tea Party groups are predominantly female—somewhere in the sixty percent range. This is even truer in the rank of informal leadership.

8 An added emphasis on “one nation under God” can always be heard.

9 I’m often one of the youngest people in these meeting. The exception to this large gap in age is filled on rare occasions by young veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars.

10 And those who oppose us are not.
tee shirt and buying materials to make protest signs. For the most part I wrote off these
mistakes as my own absentmindedness and nothing more. As time went on, however, I
started to notice subtle more nuanced intrusions into my identity. It became hard to talk
about my research with my cohort. It was almost as if part of me felt like I was betraying
the Tea Party if I did. At academic conferences I felt uncomfortable when colleagues
bashed on the Right. When my friends joked with me about spending my weekends off
“tea bagging” I had to check myself to stop from taking verbal offense. At one point I
even outlined a paper idea based on how the term “tea bagging” when used in a
derogatory way by the Left could act as a subversive means to marginalize and exploit a
minority group. I had gotten in deep, and it had happened really fast.

In my third week as a Tea Party Patriot I attended a large protest several hours
away. Over the course of the day I engaged in a large amount of fruitful participant
observation. As I drove home I was using my audio recorder to create verbal field notes
documenting the day’s events.

This is Ryan Guy. It’s April 15th 2010, Tax Day, and this is my post protest audio
log. Having just attended the Tax Day Tea Party protest, I’d like to start by making
a few general observations. First off, the event was largely successful. I’d say that
at the height of the protest we had almost 4000 people in attend...huh wow I just
used “we” to describe my part in the Tea Party.

Several moments passed as I sat speechless in the driver’s seat of my truck. I tried to
make sense of what had just happened. It occurred to me that the assimilation,
socialization, and identity performance that I had been engaged in had started to act on
me in a very real way. Prior to entering the field I had read much about the ways
ethnographers bracketed away their scholar identities in order to conduct research.\textsuperscript{11} What had not occurred to me was that it might be necessary to bracket my identity as a Tea Party Patriot from my identity as a scholar.

Later that evening when I returned home from the field I sought to make sense of what happened by turning to the ethnographers who had come before me. In Ronai’s (1992) ethnography looking at the interaction patterns of table dancers she spoke of the conflict between participant observer and researcher identities. In her discussion of bracketing she determined that it was nearly impossible to remain in one’s identity as a scholar while in the field. The very act of doing is often more powerful than any bracketed version of self. Instead, she let herself become the dancer and only several hours after leaving the site of discovery was she able to transition back into the identity of a scholar and reflect on experiences of the night. Drawing comfort that I was not the first ethnographer to experience such problems, I noted the incident and continued on with my research. Little did I know this is not the last time that my assimilation into the Tea Party would seep into my day-to-day life.

In late May, 2010 I had been actively participating in the Tea Party for two months. I found myself driving through the almond orchards that surrounded my home as I headed into campus to finish up some grading. The last several weeks had been a blur of data collection. The regional Tea Party groups I had joined had been having a plethora of

\textsuperscript{11} Up until this point I had relied on Holstien and Gubrium’s (2000) conception of bracketing. From their perspective a researcher can—should—fence off parts of their own self in order to purposely socially construct their identity. As the study continued this proved to be an impossibility. In the presence of powerful socialization, and the emotional investment that comes from performing an identity, I discovered that in order to keep bracketing from becoming an exercise in futility it was better to see those fences as semi-permeable membranes. Aspects of my identity would constantly shift between these different performances.
special meetings in order to host forums with candidates running for an upcoming local election. As I drove through the rural area I lived at I found that I recognized many of the names on the signs in my neighbor’s yards. Sean Hannity was on the radio talking about the oil spill in the gulf. As I got into town and to edged closer to campus, I noticed the names on the signs had changed. I started to see the names of unfamiliar candidates—the ones I had not had the chance to meet—the ones who were not conservatives. I drove past a large green billboard urging the re-election of the current county supervisor. Before I was able to think about it my stomach started to churn and I was filled with disgust. A moment later, I snapped out of it and was surprised by this physical reaction. I knew very little about this woman running for reelection. I had, however, spent several hours in a room with her competition. Aside from being a relatively friendly guy, I knew little about him in terms of why he would be a better candidate. What I did know was that he and I were both Tea Party Patriots, and by association on the same team.

The Tea Party and the Public Sphere

Many modern social movements have been rhetorically analyzed from perspectives of public sphere theory. The following section looks at three different sites of discovery in the search for publicity in the Tea Party movement. The first site is representative of the discursive dialog found in protest planning meetings. The second site explores a controversial protest proposal. Finally, the last site looks at when and how norm violations are acted on by members of the Tea Party Patriots.

Planning Our Advocacy

In today’s media we are being portrayed as very evil, bad and hateful people, and we don’t like it but that’s the way the media is handling us right now. This area, the
civic plaza, is a permitted area. We got a permit and got a right to be there and we have the right to control it. However, during that time of control we want to be peaceful. We want to be respectful. In *Rules for Radicals*, taught to liberals back in the sixties, Alinsky says the main job of the organizer is bait the opponent into reacting. The fact is, the calmer you are the more that you get to those who are trying to upset you. So basically if we have infiltrators, if we have people were trying to goad us into something—and this might be somewhere where they bring a sign and pretend to be a Tea Party member and the sign says something despicable, racist, or disgusting—we do not want that but we want to handle it.

During the first six months I spent with the Tea Party many of the discussions that took place during meetings were focused on planning upcoming rallies and acts of protest. One of the largest and most discussed events was the second annual Tax Day Tea Party Protest. The regional group I was working with at the time had joined forces with several other regional groups to stage large protests locally and at the state capital. In the weeks leading up to the protests fear and anxieties ran high. Rumors had been circulating that liberal infiltrators would show up at protests and attempt to paint the Tea Party in a negative light. In response to this some regional groups held special meetings to decide how such infiltrators would be handled at protests.

In a special meeting, that I attended the “core group” decided that it would be best if we spent some time discussing some various ideas and methods that can be used to pacify infiltrators without harming the image of the Tea Party movement. In the days leading up to the special meeting Tea Party members were given copies of two books. The first was Saul Alinsky’s *Rules for Radicals* and the second was H. L. Richardson’s *confrontational politics*. We were told to read them both and come to the special meeting with ideas of how we should proceed.

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12 H. L. Richardson was a California State Senator From 1966 to 1988. He went on to found the Gun Owners of America, a firearms lobby considered to be the right of the National Rifle Association.
During the meeting, we sat in a large circle and discussed the ways liberal infiltrators might attempt to bait us into reacting. Many ideas were shared during this session, however, those that involved violence, antagonizing the infiltrators, or any physical action were rejected as things that would only make the situation worse. Over the course of two hours, debate took place and ideas seemed to be discussed by all present. Barney, one of the few men in leadership roles, helped keep discussion on point. At times when the debate moved past topics relevant to the upcoming protest Barney interjected and led the discussion back to the issue at hand. When it seemed that everything that was going to be discussed had been discussed, Barney stood up and addressed the group.

It seems to be the consensus of our talk that at our rally, and other rallies, the best way to deal with any liberals is to either ignore them or kill them with kindness. However if some of you would like to design large signs that say “liberal infiltrator” and that would be okay too. All eyes are going to be on us this week and the media has a funny way of hiding their cameras while liberals cause trouble and bring them out when we fight back. We cannot give them any ammunition to hurt us or the national Tea Party movement. You have to be on your best behavior.

The use of critical-rational debate in meetings planned to protest the actions of the state fits well into a traditional Habermasian conception of the public sphere. In the traditional sense, Habermas (1962) argued that an idealized public sphere would function as a place where the citizens of a state could gather, discuss, critique, and debate the role and actions of the state. In this sense, the Tea Party meets this definition. What is not as clear

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13 Alinsky (1971) argues that a major goal of a radical is to goad your enemy into reacting and using that to your advantage.

14 The Tea Party groups I participated in tended to favor women majorities. The first regional group I joined only had two men in leadership positions.
is whether or not a Tea Party meet the definitions consistent with a public that is counter to a dominant one.

When I consider the demographics of the Tea Party groups I participated in, I note a sample of individuals that seemed to be consistent with other Tea Party Patriots I had met across the states of California and Oregon. They were predominantly white, of retirement age, and made up of slightly more women than men. From a critical standpoint, I was tempted to discount this group— and other groups like them— as those best associated with the dominant public. I, however, chose instead to look deeper into who these people were. Over the next few months, I made an effort to learn more about my fellow Tea Party Patriots and what they believed politically. Instead of an elitist bourgeoisie, I found a population of middle-class individuals. I spoke with teachers, mechanics, small business owners, and even university professors. I realized that in seeing only age and whiteness I was oversimplifying the complexities and perhaps even diversity of this group.

It is difficult to categorize conservative discourses— even those that are only fiscally conservative in nature— as being counter to those heard among the dominant public discourses. What is unique about the discussions found inside the Tea Party movement is that regardless of how much coverage conservative ideas get in the media, there is a belief in the idea, among members, that the vast majority of the media and public discourses favor those on the Left. What evolves from this belief is a conceptualization of perceived marginalization. During my interviews and conversations with other Tea Party Patriots, this perception of marginalization was a reoccurring theme. Moving forward under the assumption that the perception of counterpublicity is, at the
minimum, a useful lens to further explore the Tea Party movement, if, allows us to dive deeper into the process in which discourses are developed inside the Tea Party movement.

In the spring of 2010, my regional Tea Party group was very concerned with the up-and-coming city council elections. The local city council–predominantly liberal–was very unpopular with the local Tea Party group. Three members of local Tea Party had declared their candidacy for city council office and seemed to have the support of their fellow Tea Party Patriots. Up until this point, the advocacy on behalf of the city council candidates had been relatively standard. Members of the group had volunteered to make phone calls and walk precincts on behalf of these candidates. In the meetings, however, several Tea Party Patriots expressed frustrations that what we were doing was not enough. In response to these frustrations a woman named Sarah asked that she be given a block of time during the meeting to present a unique protest idea to the group. The following meeting she did just that.

Many of you know that earlier this spring the city council prohibited left hand turns on Orange Street and thus massive amounts of traffic and buses were diverted down our quiet residential neighborhoods. We all got together and went to the city internal affairs meeting. At this particular IA meeting the staff member who was running the meeting opened by saying “ya know there’s two words why the city is here” he proceeded to draw a circle with two eyes and a smile “happy citizens” to which one of us shouted out “WE ARE NOT HAPPY!” After the meeting I thought about this and divine inspiration took over. Paint stick, two paper plates, happy face on one side, sad face on the other. We can all meet at the city plaza, we need 200-500 people, we can then take out signs and attend the city council meeting. This would be a huge action statement and would gain a lot of attention.

After presenting her plan she spent several minutes taking questions and discussing specifics of the protest. The response seemed fairly positive. A member of the group offered to donate a couple hundred paint sticks to the cause. Two weeks later it was a
spectacle at the city council meeting. In the meeting following the paint stick protest, Sarah was honored for coming up with such an innovative idea. The core group leader running the meeting claimed that we had put the city council on notice, and garnered more support for our cause. There did seem to a significantly larger group of new members present that day.\textsuperscript{15}

In the meetings that followed the “paint stick protest,” other members attempted to emulate Sarah’s successful protest idea. Members used the newly added “announcements and ideas” portion of the meeting to pitch their own protest ideas. Most of these ideas were met with lukewarm approval. The group discussed and approved the hosting of a booth at a local gun show. A Sunday costumed corner side rally was scheduled in a neighboring town in hopes of creating a new sister group. A total of 1,776 teabags were purchased and mailed to the state capital. When each of these ideas was pitched, most of the comments and discussion concerned ways to improve the protest. That was not the case in the early June meeting when relative newcomer, Evan Dietrich, brought his idea for a Flag Day protest to the group.

The Flag Day Protest

On Evan Dietrich’s second meeting as a Tea Party Patriot, he pitched an idea for a Flag Day protest.

I want to remind everyone of a nearly forgotten holiday June 14. Does anyone know what June 14 is? Flag Day. Very few people in America celebrate it or even remember it anymore. It is a forgotten holiday. We have an opportunity to take June 14 and turn it in to a useful holiday that can send a statement. So here is the idea. I know that everyone here respects the flag, and I know that no one wants to dishonor

\textsuperscript{15} Over the course of the past twelve months I have witnessed Tea Party groups employ a variety of different means in order to recruit new members. Some groups have utilized billboards, radio ads, newspaper ads, and even costumed sign spinners. It has been my observation, however, that the largest gains in membership take place immediately before and after large protest events.
the flag or the men and women that fought and died for it, that is not the idea here. What I want to talk about is a way to use the flag in a traditional military signalment to send a message. This year instead of flying the flag simply proud and true as we normally do for Flag Day, I propose that we fly the flag of the United States of America everywhere on June 14 upside down.

As Evan laid out his Flag Day plan I sat in the center of the room and took stock of those sitting around me. Unlike the protest proposals of weeks past there did not seem to be the same level of uniform agreement about this topic. Evan went on to explain that the way the protest world work is by getting the message of the event out to the media and other Tea Party groups via social network sites. He argued that by making the purpose clear it would avoid any disrespect and send a message to those who have led our country to be in such great distress.\(^\text{16}\) At this point Evan asked the audience for a show of hands to determine if they thought this was a good idea or bad idea. In response to if it was a good idea slim majority of members around the room raised their hands. In response to if it was a bad idea a small handful of individuals, seated in the back corner of the room, all raised their hands aggressively at the same time. Evan responded to the group of folks that thought it was a bad idea and asked them to come up and voice their concerns.

Comments were slow at first as some members expressed worry about how people might react to the protest. While some members discussed the possibility of creating explanation signs to post underneath the upside down flags I watched an elderly man make his way towards Evan. In an unexpected outburst the old man ripped the microphone out of Evans hand. Startled by his actions the entire room went silent.

This is an absurd idea! The American flag is a standard. It represents something other than defeat. We have problems like this all the time. Uncle Harry will die and

\(^{16}\) The United States Flag Code states “The flag should never be displayed with the union down, except as a signal of dire distress in instances of extreme danger to life or property” (United States Flag Code, 1942).
people put their flag at half mast. You do not do that! That flag is up there respecting history, not bad news. The idea of flying The flag Upside down is ridiculous

Surprised and a bit flustered by the incident, Evan stumbled over his words for a moment as the man walked away. As Evan recovered, he yelled after the man, “Sir, before you sit down would there be any condition under which you might consider this idea?” The old man turned around and replied “When Fort Laramie is under attack and we are being invaded then you fly the flag upside-down. You are responding to an absurd fictional thing. Do not play games with the American flag.”

As the old man’s words settled with the crowd a middle-aged woman walked to the center of the room and took possession of the microphone.

As for as whether or not our country has been Invaded: our so-called president is a traitor. He has disregarded our Constitution in every possible way. He has ignored us, he has called us “no longer a Christian nation.” I have seen enough to convince me that we are under siege in the most insidious way possible. We need to wake people up. We are in big trouble. If we wake people up by flying the flag upside down then more power to us.

At this point, the room erupted into a chaos of arguments and angry words. A man stood up in the back and yelled, “those antiwar leftists flew the flag upside down during the Vietnam War. I for one refuse to be anything like them.” As chaos erupted around me I started to wonder if this argument would come to blows when I turned to see a very elderly man slowly walking towards the center of the room. He politely took the microphone from a bewildered Evan and in a somber tone began to address the crowd.

If you are going to do this you need to make sure the word gets out as to what it means. The publicity needs to be widespread, and intense before we do something like this. Because to many people I think holding the flag upside down is a sign of significant disrespect. I know that when I came back from, from where I was, when and I landed in Fort Mason in 1953 there were antiwar demonstrators burning the
flag while holding it upside down. I don’t want to be part of something that would do that to our men and women overseas.

The room was silent in the wake of the man’s words. Evan again asked for a show of hands to determine if the idea was a good one or a bad one. Overwhelmingly the votes went against it.

The incident surrounding the proposed Flag Day protest is critical to understanding the development of counterpublicity inside the Tea Party movement. Prior to this debate the development of discourses to be used by the Tea Party had been little more than an approval process. The proposed Flag Day protest was the first incident that caused the members of the organization to weigh values and ideals against a desire to act and seek social change. Nested deep in the ideologies of the Tea Party is a profound respect for patriotic symbols of the United States. This is evidenced each week in the ritualized recognition of veteran members, the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance, and even the organizational membership title of Tea Party Patriot.

When forced with the decision between honoring valued symbols and pursuing advocacy the Tea Party Patriots were forced to engage and debate the issue more thoroughly than they had others in the past. The meeting place, where all actions and advocacy have been planned in the past, had become a battleground where competing ideas and values were pitted against each other. During the exchanges that led up to the final decision not to pursue the protest, many opinions and viewpoints that had previously been silent were expressed to other members of the group. Never before had opinions of Obama as a traitor or desires not to become like left-wing protesters of the 1960s been expressed publicly to the group. Amidst all the passion and anger this group of Tea Party
Patriots had retreated into a protected space in order to test and develop discourses. This was something new to them.

**Crossing A Line**

You all have been a great audience. As I wrap up this speech and move into questions I have one last promise that I make to you all today. If you elect me Governor I will do whatever it takes. No matter how hard they fight me in Sacramento. I will do whatever it takes to deport all the illegals—who we know to bring crime and poverty to our state—and finish that damn wall!

At a June 15, 2010, Tea Party Patriots meeting, “Home Grown Tea Party Candidate” Eric Hall came to persuade the Tea Party Patriots that we should elect him governor of California. After explaining his three point plan to: cut wasteful state spending, repeal harmful global warming legislation, and secure the borders, he turned the microphone over to the audience to take questions. For about 15 minutes, people asked him to clarify his position on a variety of issues including: definitions of marriage, changes to the tax system, and immigration reform. When the questions stopped, Eric started to wrap up. Cutting Eric off mid-sentence, a short elderly man stood up in the back of the room and said, “I have a question.” Eric, paused, walked over to the man, and handed him the microphone.

My name is Ivan Clark, and I’ve got a question about this wall you want to build. You see I’m here because I’m tired of the expansion of government into people lives. This wall you want to build is a God damn travesty and waste of tax dollars. I don’t want no god damn wall. I want a government that tells Mexico to keep their people there and to do so diplomatically. Not a stupid wall.

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17 There is a loose interpretation of the no social issues rule at Tea Party meetings. On several occasions I witnessed topics such as abortion, gay marriage, and other social issues discussed in the space of the Tea Party meeting. The same cannot be said for protests or rallies. In practice, the rule applies only to publicly disseminated rhetoric of a Tea Party. In the past there have been “Liberal infiltrators” present during the Tea Party meetings, however, by and large most of the Tea Party members I spoke with in casual conversations and interviews reported that they found the meeting setting to be a safe place to discuss all manner of conservative politics.
At this point Eric took the microphone back from Ivan and stated, “Well sir, I can understand your frustrations, however, you don’t understand the illegals’ desire to get into our country. Nothing but a show of force will stop them. Okay other questions?” Clearly upset with the answer, Ivan remained standing and shouted at Eric. “You did not answer my question.” Eric ignored Ivan and started to take questions from the other side of the room. Ivan remained standing and stated, “I came here to have my questions answered, not to be ignored.” At this point, the people sitting around Ivan started to scold him. One woman told him to shut up and sit down. Others issued sarcastic thank you comments. “Thanks for your comment Ivan.” “Yeah, uh, thanks for that.” For ten minutes I watched as Ivan stood in defiance of those around him and glared at Eric. After ten minutes Ivan’s legs started to tremble. Having stood there, ignored by Eric and his fellow Tea Party Patriots, Ivan let out a sigh and sat down in defeat. That was the last meeting I ever saw him at.

Prior to this incident much of the discourse I had observed inside Tea Party meetings and on private social network sites seemed to fit loosely into the model of what Squires (2002) termed “enclave counterpublics” (p. 448). Squires argues that a “public can enclave itself, hiding counter-hegemonic ideas and strategies in order to survive or avoid sanctions, while internally producing lively debate and planning” (p. 448). Having an enclave to develop discourses in is a useful strategy for a counterpublic. In the mainstream, it may be hard for such a public to collectively share and engage in critical-rational debates. Squires argues that an enclaved counterpublic is a place where members are free to express and tryout ideas among those they share worldviews with. Inside these
protected places rough drafts of discourses are created, polished, and eventually—in the case of a social movement—released to the outer public.

The incident with Ivan problematizes the counterpublicity of the Tea Party movement. Making sense of the group’s reaction to Ivan requires the use of “polysemic interpretation” (McKerrow, 1989, p. 107). One explanation of this event could lie in a violation of the public’s norms of acceptable perspectives. The Tea Party meeting, as a forum for enclaved counterpublicity, is structured to allow the development and expansion of ideas under the banner of the “three core values.” As made clear in both the new member orientation sessions and the organizational texts, those who wish to engage in topics of discussion that exist beyond this framework need to find another place to do so. If Ivan’s discourse violated these structured values then it would be necessary to act against him in order to protect the group’s development as a counterpublic.

Did Ivan’s discourse violate the stated values of the Tea Party Patriots? Looking at Ivan’s question, it appears to take issue with the expansion of government power inherent in the building of a border wall, consistent with the value of limited government. His objections on the “waste of tax dollars” seems to fulfill the values of fiscal responsibility and desire for free market solutions.\(^{18}\) Seeing no violation of the stated values of the Tea Party movement suggests that a hidden set of values not found in the explicit rhetoric of the movement is at play. In past elections many conservatives have voted for candidates who support tougher immigration policies, including the construction of a new border wall (Blanton, 2006). The group’s negative approach to

\(^{18}\) Cost estimates to complete the US-Mexico border fence have ranged from 2.5 billion to 49 billion dollars for a fence expected to last a maximum of 25 years (Hendricks, 2007).
Ivan might represent a manifestation of values that contradict the stated position of the Tea Party Patriots.19

In addition to—or as an alternative interpretation of—his infringement of hidden group values, Ivan’s negative reception might be explained as a violation of normalized formality and politeness. In the weeks leading up to his speech, e-mail messages and announcements at meetings had touted Eric Hall’s qualifications as a retired high-ranking military official and small business owner. In Hall’s introduction by the member running that meeting, he was described as a “man of principle and status who is already fighting for our cause.” Turning to Brown and Levinson’s (1987) theories of politeness, Ivan’s question to Hall might have been perceived by his audience as a face threat to a potential champion of the Tea Party. Instead of supporting Ivan for his adherence to group values, the members of the audience turned against him in an effort to mitigate the face threat to Hall’s persona. A tendency to value politeness over the critical examination of candidates who wave the banner of the Tea Party may represent a significant challenge for the Tea Party Patriots. Actions—or perhaps the lack of action—such as this may impact the ability of the Tea Party movement to seek out candidates who champion their core values.

19 In my interviews, I sought to clarify the contradiction surrounding increased immigration related enforcement. Although a compelling argument can be made to categorize increased border enforcement as an expansion of government most Tea Party Patriots countered that the United States federal government is constitutionally mandated to secure the borders from foreign threats. Thus, supporting immigration restricting legislation and enforcement is interpreted to fall within the boundaries of the three core values.
The Evolution of a Movement

Social movements are dynamic organizations. The constant influx of new members and changing sociopolitical positions ensure this. This final section looks at the way the Tea Party movement evolved over the course of my study. I start by exploring the details of the restructuring and government accountability project. I conclude by pointing out several key ways this structural transformation impacts the Tea Party as a social movement.

The Government Accountability Project

Welcome to our 2011 plan of action. We are very cleverly calling it our blueprint to make a difference. Those of us who have been here since the beginning know that the first six months were really just major venting sessions. Everyone just got their stress out. However, as we grew we went more towards the watchdog groups, and then when elections came around we went more towards speakers. Now we were kind of stuck in between. 2012 is a ways out and we still have to deal with a new congress. So we are restructuring our meetings to move away from being speaker based—that’s not to say we will not have speakers—and towards member involvement meetings. Many members have come to those of us in the core group and told us they want to get involved, that they want to do something because they were tired of just listening to the TV and yelling at it. Instead of just having you come in here and rant and rave—like we have been accused of doing—we are actually going to get you involved this time. We want you to leave each meeting with a clear plan of action.

In November of 2010, the Republican Party achieved several major electoral victories. While many factors contributed to their success, advocacy performed by Tea Party groups on behalf of Tea Party candidates is considered to be a major contributing factor (Zernike, 2010). In the wake of their success, regional groups were faced with a crisis. The 2012 election was over two years out and the progressive agenda of the Obama administration was stalled by a split congress. The purpose of the Tea Party movement suddenly seemed temporarily unclear. During December of 2010 Tea Party
meetings were canceled for the first time since I begin my study. Unknown to me during these canceled sessions “core group” members were communicating with other regional groups in order to restructure and refocus the Tea Party movement.

In the first meeting of 2011, I found myself watching a PowerPoint presentation entitled “The Restructuring of the Tea Party Patriots.” Over the course of an hour Candy Saunders explained the ways in which the format of Tea Party meetings would be streamlined in order to increase productivity and produce results. Candy explained that in her weekly conference call with the newly formed national Tea Party Patriots organization a decision had been reached that all regional groups would take part in a congressional accountability project, nicknamed CAP. The intended purpose of the CAP was to monitor the new freshman Congress. Candy informed us that while CAP was a good start, our local group would do significantly more.

Candy went on to tell us that several of the other core group members were concerned about the lack of structure and hierarchy inside the Tea Party movement.20 In order to facilitate a solution to this problem the weekly meetings would be completely restructured to include a series of breakout groups. In an attempt to expand on the national CAP idea the core group decided to create our own program that dealt with all levels of government. The program would be known as the Government Accountability Project (GAP).21 Each breakout group –GAP group—would be focused on a specific

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20 In the interviews I conducted at the end of ethnographic data collection I found that other members, not part of the core group, also shared concerns that the Tea Party Patriots lacked clear leadership and direction. One interviewee commented that he felt that the Tea Party “is like a runaway ship with no captain. Sooner or later it is going to crash.”

21 The national organization has since abandoned CAP and adopted GAP using our regional group as the model.
level of government. These levels included local government, state government, and federal government. Each group would have an official leader and would be composed of Tea Party Patriots interested in that area. Once part of a group, members will be responsible—under the direction of their leader—for creating a means to track and monitor issues taking place at their assigned level of government.

The announcement of the GAP program and associated restructuring was met with a fairly positive response. Some members asked clarifying questions about what was desired in each group. After answering questions Candy concluded her presentation and introduced the three new leaders of the GAP groups. She then instructed us to pick a group and move to a specific physical location in the room. I watched as people made their way to the different groups. I noticed several of the people whom I have come to know the best were making their way to the national group. Since national politics is a topic I am fairly fluent in, I decided to join this group.

Once folks had found their seats, there were approximately fifteen other people who also had chosen to join the national group.22 Having used up most of the meeting time that night we only had a few minutes to create an e-mail mailing list and introduce ourselves and our reasons for joining the national GAP group. After the introductions had concluded, Scott, the national GAP group leader, informed us to come to the next meeting with a list of important national issues worth tracking.

22 The local group dwarfed both the national and statewide GAP groups in size. Where the state and national groups contained approximately fifteen people each, the local group contained over forty. In an interview with a member of the local group I inquired as to the reasoning for the disparity in size. His reasoning was that “small government starts in the city you live in. The decisions that take place there are often the most likely to directly affect you.”
In the week leading up to the next meeting I found myself taking part in more Tea Party related e-mail correspondence than I had in the entire year I had been studying the movement. Between the fifteen of us we shared and discussed a wide variety of news articles and political issues of the day. At the start of the next meeting, I found myself conversing more than I ever have before. In the past my conversations with other Tea Party Patriots have been fragmented from week to week. I would often discuss the business of the day but rarely did conversations continue from meeting to meeting, with the new GAP structure this was not the case. The smaller size of these breakout groups facilitated enhanced relational development at levels I had only achieved with a select few other Tea Party Patriots.

When I arrived at the second meeting after the GAP restructuring I immediately walked to the corner and sat with my GAP group. We chatted about various political issues until the meeting began. Even though we had restructured, the first part of the meeting remained the same. The disclaimer was read, the pledge was said, and veterans were recognized. A couple brief announcements were made. Candy directed some of the new members to an orientation meeting away from the GAP groups, and we were left to get to work. Scott had prepared an e-mail agenda of the night’s tasks for all of us. The general game plan was to brainstorm and discuss the people and issues that we needed to track. Using a large whiteboard, we worked as a group to generate a large list of topics. After the list was complete we then chose the fifteen most critical issues—in relation to the three core values of the Tea Party—and assigned one to each member. It was up to each member to follow and track developments in her or his chosen topic area. Each week we would all be responsible for giving a report and informing the rest of our
group on any action steps or advocacy that was needed to uphold the values of the Tea Party.

During our GAP meeting Candy approached our corner with two new Tea Party members. Having just completed their orientation meeting they had both decided to join the national GAP group. Since they were both new, Scott decided that it would be best if they were assisted by senior members until they got to hang of being a Tea Party Patriot. One of them, a woman in her early forties, was assigned to shadow me. Having chosen the topic of illegal immigration we spent several minutes brainstorming potential topics that might be worth tracking. After that she asked me several questions about my experiences and reasons for joining the Tea Party. I explained to her that I was a graduate student studying political and organizational communication as well as rhetoric. I went on to discuss how my interest in right-wing social movements led me to the Tea Party.

The restructuring of the Tea Party meetings is relevant to the development of the Tea Party as a social movement in several ways. First, from a rhetoric of movements standpoint the early actions of the Tea Party movement were consistent with the types of “street protests” studied by Haiman (1967). After achieving success in the 2012 midterm elections the Tea Party movement was faced with a rhetorical crisis—to link back to Griffin (1952). Facing termination or at least temporary dissolution, the Tea Party had a choice to adapt or die. Choosing the former, organizers of Tea Party regional groups opted to transform the groups into a more business like setting.23

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23 I have often pondered the reasons for the sudden shift to more formalized organizational structure. It seems plausible that since many Tea Party Patriots run their own small businesses the structure is something familiar and desirable.
A second major rhetorical development of the restructuring relates to the Tea Party movement’s publicity. Warner (2002) argued that it was exceedingly difficult for large publics to engage in the types of discussions necessary to construct discourses representative of the entire group. When discussions took place prior to the restructuring, a single voice was often one among one to two hundred others. The smaller group size makes it easier to solicit feedback from all members of the organization.

In addition to rhetorical developments, the restructuring also impacts the ways in which new and current members are socialized and assimilated into the organization. Drawing from Myers and Oetzel’s (2003) dimensionalization of organizational assimilation, it can be argued that when new members are more familiar with existing members, have a higher level of involvement, and demonstrate competency in their job, they are more likely to successfully assimilate into the organization. First, the restructuring achieves existing member familiarity by decreasing the number of people new members interact with and increasing the amount of interaction and opportunity for relational development with a smaller number of existing members. Second, one of the key purposes of the creation of the GAP groups was to give Tea Party Patriots active tasks to complete each week. When new members join a GAP group they are assigned a topic area to monitor—with the help of an existing member. This level of task involvement, coupled with increased contact with a mentor, facilitates new members to make gains in their familiarity with others, levels of involvement, and eventually competency at their task. Last, under the new structure all new members undergo the organizational orientation session. In the past, these orientation sessions were held before the main meetings began and some new members did not attend. By holding the
orientation session during the actual meeting, the Tea Party Patriots are able to establish organizational norms among all new recruits. All of these occurrences factor into the new members successful assimilation.

In this chapter, three thematic categories representative of the Tea Party movement were examined. First, the means in which assimilation is facilitated in the Tea Party movement was explored through my own assimilation process. Second, evidence of Tea Party enclaved counterpublicity was examined through a look at the process in which discourses were constructed inside Tea Party meetings. Last, the evolution of the Tea Party movement was complicated through an examination of the GAP restructuring. In each of those categories, textual description and subsequent analysis took place. In the next chapter the results of this analysis will be discussed and implications will be drawn.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The analysis found in the previous chapter greatly informs our understanding of the communicative action and rhetoric of the Tea Party as a social movement. Perhaps the most critical discovery derived from this analysis is the central role the official Tea Party meetings play in development of the Tea Party movement. In this final chapter, I discuss my research findings through the centrality of the Tea Party meeting. From that standpoint I will address and answer the proposed research questions. To proceed, however, it is necessary to briefly discuss the relationship of the peripheral channels of interaction in relation to these findings.

A key finding of this thesis is that the official meetings of the Tea Party are the most critical settings for the construction of discourses and for the active assimilation and socialization of members. It is important, however, not to misunderstand the role played by peripheral channels: rallies, protests, events, and social networks. Over the last year, the vast amount of communicative interactions I participated in took place through one of these peripheral channels. Of the seven regional groups I interacted with, official meetings were only held one to four times a month. As a result, a preponderance of interaction defaulted to these alternative channels.

Early in the data collection process, it was my expectation that the peripheral channels would represent the most significant sites for discovery. As evident from the
privileging of the Tea Party meeting in the proceeding analysis chapter, this was not the case. The official Tea Party meetings are the central pillars of the Tea Party social movement. Although the peripheral channels act to support, reinforce, and display the rhetorics of the movement, they depend upon the meeting for the genesis of ideas. It is from this understanding that this final chapter proceeds. From here, I will answer and discuss each of the three research questions. Following that discussion, I will conclude by briefly presenting some implications and future directions of research.

Research Question One

The first research question focused on the methods and practices used to assimilate and socialize new members into the Tea Party movement. Based on the analysis there are two important aspects to be considered. In order to explore these aspects I will draw on Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) dimensions of informal and formal assimilation strategies. I will proceed by first discussing the formal strategies of assimilation and follow-up with the discussion of the informal ones.

Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) theory of organizational socialization argued that in order for newcomers to be accepted into groups they would first have to undergo a series of tests to ensure that their abilities, motives, and values mesh with those held by the existing group members. Often, in order to facilitate passage, groups will find ways in which to formally and informally adapt and reconstruct new members to fill these requirements. Until the group collectively accepts the new member, they are
excluded from organizational secrets and the knowledge needed to differentiate the presentational rhetoric from the operational rhetoric of the group.¹

The key to formal assimilation and socialization of new members into the Tea Party movement is the orientation session. As supported by the body of organizational communication research concerning assimilation, orientation sessions are among the most effective strategies organizations can use to adapt newcomers to organizational norms. Although appearing to be unorganized from the outside–through presentational rhetoric–the internal methods of newcomer assimilation draw more parallels to those found in institutions and businesses than one would expect from a grassroots social movement. Through these sessions, newcomers are exposed to the values, history, and goals of the particular regional group and the larger Tea Party movement.

The importance of the orientation session to the leaders of the regional groups can be seen through their evolution over the past eleven months. When I first joined the Tea Party, the orientation sessions took place thirty to forty-five minutes before the actual meeting started. In order to encourage newcomer participation, group leadership used a variety of channels–such as e-mail messages, phone calls, and announcements at the start of the meeting–to communicate the importance of attending these sessions. From my observations and an interview with an unofficial leader, I surmise that these efforts were moderately successful. Further evidence of the orientation sessions’ importance in facilitating the assimilation of new members can be surmised from the decision to

¹ Van Maanen and Schein (1979) differentiated between presentational and operational group rhetoric. They claimed that outsiders of an organization were only able to gain access to presentational rhetoric that consisted of messages constructed for outsiders concerning what goes on inside the group. Once newcomers become accepted into the group they gain access to the operational rhetoric that is used by insiders to discuss the business and matters relevant to the group. This level of access facilitates the ability of socialized members to understand the unofficial, yet agreed upon, norms of the group.
restructure the timing of orientation sessions as part of the GAP changes. Following implementation of the GAP, the meeting’s orientation sessions were moved to the period after the general business of the meeting had taken place. As a result, all newcomers present at the meeting underwent the orientation session.

In addition to this formalized means of socialization/assimilation, the analysis also illuminates examples of informal assimilation strategies. Chief among them is the use of stories and conversation to build shared understanding. During my time as a Tea Party Patriot, one of the most prevalent observations I made was the desire of members to talk and share experiences with other like-minded individuals. One of the most common ways this phenomenon occurred was through storytelling. In the Tea Party, stories function much like currency. I discovered that when I shared my own Tea Party stories with other members I felt more included in the group. This contrasts sharply to times when I did not share and then experienced feelings of exclusion and indebtedness to those who spoke more. On the occasions where I did not aggressively share and seek out interactions I found myself being called out on it.

The use of storytelling in the Tea Party is one of the most important ways newcomers are informally assimilated into the culture of Tea Party. This claim can further be supported by looking at the ways in which longtime members model this behavior. First, during orientation sessions leadership figures, such as Candy, told and encouraged the telling of stories by new members. Second, the discourse that is presented by existing members facilitating meetings tends to be punctuated with relevant Tea Party anecdotes. Last, much of the discourse found on regional social network sites—that
newcomers often view prior to their first meetings–is dominated by the narratives surrounding various Tea Party activities, which are posted by existing members.

The findings of the first research question are interesting due to their similarity with assimilation research in institutions and business organizations. In the field of organizational communication several studies have reported on the effective use of orientation sessions and storytelling to assimilate newcomers into organizations (Mitchell, 2010; Myers, 2005). The discovery that the same strategies are taking place inside the Tea Party meetings suggests that assimilation into the Tea Party movement may have more in common with the ways employees are assimilated into business and institutional organizations than with other social movements.

To summarize, newcomers to the Tea Party movement are assimilated and socialized into the cultural and organizational practices of the Tea Party movement through the use of formal and informal means. First, from a formalized standpoint, newcomers are adapted to the ideas, values, and goals of the Tea Party movement through the attendance of an orientation session. Second, the informal use of storytelling, as modeled by existing members, encourages newcomers to create their own narrative histories demonstrating commitment and ownership of the movements norms and values. Ultimately, these strategies of assimilation and socialization appear to parallel those found in businesses and institutions.

Research Question Two

The second research question focused on the inner discursive practices found inside Tea Party meetings and their relation to the construction of Tea Party discourses.
Based on the analysis I argue that the rhetoric found inside the protected space of the Tea Party meeting constitutes an enclave counterpublic as proposed by Squires (2002). The ways in which this construct of counterpublicity leads to the construction of outer Tea Party discourses will be discussed next.

Early in the genesis of the Tea Party movement, more specifically in the days preceding the April 15, 2009 tax day Tea Party protests, no formal regional groups had been formed. As a result, the debut of the Tea Party movement was outwardly presented as a mob of angry conservatives wielding a variety of offensive and often misspelled messages (Watson, 2009). Since then, and with the emergence of regional groups, Tea Party protests and events have been predominantly free of such unfavorable rhetorical acts (Gardner, 2010). A key explanation for this change is evidenced in the enclave counterpublic nature of the Tea Party meeting.

Over the course of my research, as described in the analysis, I observed various incidents where the norms of what was and what was not acceptable during protests was debated during official Tea Party meetings. Key among those discourses was a need to align presentational rhetorics with the libertarian aligned “three core values” of the Tea Party movement. Any proposals to commit rhetorical acts representative of socially conservative issues—outside of the meeting place—were shot down. This also included any messages that were perceived as racist or homophobic.²

The Tea Party meeting serves as a place to test out discourses. Ideas and plans that support the three core values are usually greenlit by the group and issues that fall

² Although on several occasions discussions of socially conservative issues took place during Tea Party meetings, never during my time in the Tea Party did I hear racist or homophobic comments. In fact on several occasions I observed group leaders describe such rhetoric as disgusting and despicable.
outside of their range are snuffed out. There is, however, a degree of nuance that can be observed in this process. An issue prevalent in one single regional group I participated in was the Obama birth certificate controversy. During the meetings I attended, many of the participants discussed the theory that President Obama was not a natural born United States citizen. Though discussed and generally agreed-upon, suggestions to take our actions, such as the purchase of a billboard, were snubbed by the group under the explanation that it would look bad for the Tea Party movement. As shown by this example, and the descriptions of the protest planning activities in the analysis, the space of the Tea Party meeting provides a forum where Tea Party Patriots can discuss the full range of conservative political opinions. Tea Party members use the space to pitch potential rhetorics at the other members of their regional group. After debate, if the group agrees that the rhetoric will favorably represent the Tea Party movement, then action is approved. If—as was the case with the proposed Flag Day protest—the group decides the rhetoric will represent the Tea Party movement unfavorably, then the action is prohibited.

Research Question Three

The final research question was concerned with how elements of socialization and assimilation into the culture of the Tea Party impacted the rhetorical development of the Tea Party as a social movement. To answer this question I will discuss how Tea Party groups, through socialized and shared values, attempted to overcome what Griffin (1952) referred to as a social movement’s rhetorical crisis. Ultimately, I will show how the commonly held values of the Tea Party membership has led participants to reevaluate, restructure, and change the direction of the movement.
As previously discussed, the period after the 2010 midterm elections has been difficult for Tea Party groups. Meetings that had been populated by over 300 people in November had dwindled to less than 100 in January. Among Tea Party members there was a great deal of uncertainty as to what the movement needed to do next. In response to this crisis unofficial leadership figures at the regional level networked with other regions on a national level and came up with a restructuring plan for the Tea Party movement. When fully implemented this plan would convert the Tea Party meetings to a format that was significantly more team-based, hierarchical, and structured. In short, as the leader of my GAP group put it, “more business like.”

When I look at the common characteristics of my fellow Tea Party Patriots I notice that many of them have backgrounds in business. Predominately those who are outspoken or had been in previously informal leadership roles were those who ran companies—or had run companies prior to retiring. Many off these individuals had openly expressed concerns that the loosely organized and leaderless format of the regional groups was a major weakness of the Tea Party movement. Though at first this idea seemed to gain little traction, the period of rhetorical crisis presented an opportunity to allow the value to gain ascendancy within the group.

In addition to concerns about structure, The Tea Party movement’s potential to function as a “rhetoric of the streets” (Haiman, 1967, p. 100) style social movement is an issue that does not sit well with the values of many Tea Party Patriots. The antiwar protesters who defined that style of protest during the 1960s are viewed in a very negative light by many Tea Party Patriots. During the backlash of the proposed Flag Day
protest many members spoke out in concern and disgust that the Tea Party movement was starting to parallel “those traitors” who protested the Vietnam War.

Ultimately, the values passed on through various means of socialization and assimilation strategies has led to some fundamental changes in the Tea Party movement. A more businesslike structure with less emphasis on protests and other forms of public advocacy are representative of those values. Currently the uncertainty that led to the initial rhetorical crisis seems to have passed, however, the transition away from what commonly defines a social movement may signify a new rhetorical crisis that the Tea Party will have to face.

Implications and Future Research

The conclusion of this study presents some dire implications for the future of the Tea Party movement. The regional groups that make up the Tea Party movement have proven to be very successful at assimilating new members into the values and ideologies of the movement. They are also very successful at creating an environment where those values are continuously reinforced through various means of socialization. Arguably, these abilities are in large part responsible for the growth and success of the movement to date. Recently changes that moved Tea Party groups away from advocacy-based action and towards a more structured business-like model appear to have occurred in response to shared values concerning hierarchy, structure, and a general dislike of the left-wing groups who have historically engaged in social movement advocacy. If things continue to
proceed along the current path then it is possible that the Tea Party movements may follow Griffin’s (1952) framework into the final phase of termination.³

The findings of the study also have implications for current conceptions of counterpublics theory. In Squires’s (2002) conception a counterpublic becomes enclaved as a means to increase the survival of discourses that had been poorly received by dominant publics. The Tea Party followed this pattern by retreating to protected enclaves after they were attacked and criticized by many in the media and on the Internet. What makes the Tea Party’s use of enclaves unique is that instead of simply using this kind of counterpublicity as a means to ensure the survival of their discourses, they instead used it as a forum to reconstruct their rhetoric for distribution to outside publics. This consistent restructuring and presentation of Tea Party discourses may represent an expansion of enclaved counterpublicity or even an altogether new type of counterpublicity.

There are several limitations of this study and directions for future research worth exploring. First, the means of data collection is this study required me to draw on my own lived experience emerging into the Tea Party movement. Balancing the role of researcher and participant is a complicated process and something that I did not always succeed at. The nature of this type of qualitative inquiry led me to actively undergo the types of organizational assimilation and socialization I have described in my analysis. Working closer with another researcher or adviser during the actual data collection process might have helped to provide alternative explanations and interpretations of phenomena observed.

³ With the possibility of a small national CATO Institute-like think-tank taking its place.
A second limitation of this study lies in scope. In particular, this study focused on the rhetoric of a handful of west coast based regional groups where thousands exist nationally (Tea Party Patriots, n.d.b). Future research on the Tea Party movement should focus on how other regional groups function, the connection between groups, and how technological tools such as linked social networks facilitate the construction of national Tea Party discourses.

A third limitation, in need of mention, relates to the choices made in the presentation of data. Over the course of the study, I accumulated a massive pool of data. It is in the nature of ethnography to leave researchers with large bodies of data to sift through, and, there is always the risk of missing a key piece. In the process of selecting textual fragments for inclusion in the construction of thematic categories of analysis I made choices. Predominately, I pulled fragments from the ethnographic events experienced at Tea Party meetings. This choice is strongly reflected in my analysis. Future work might seek to find more of a balance between different sources of data.

Related to the choices made in selection of data is the place of interviews in this study. Peripheral channels of data collection, interviews in particular, are underrepresented in my analysis. This was a choice I made. Interviews did, however, play a key role in helping me align my own experience as a Tea Party Patriot with other members. The small number of interviews that took place at the end of the study—four one-hour sessions—extended conversations that had begun in the meeting setting. From my perspective these interactions seemed less like an alternative means of data collection and more like a continuation of there conversational interactions I found in the meeting setting. Interviews gave me added insights into my own experiences. I would recommend
that future researchers, conducting critical-rhetorical ethnographies, include interviews at different stages of data collection. This may serve to better equip the ethnographer/critic in making choices of what needs to be explored in the body of collected data.

This study sought to discover how individuals active in the Tea Party movement were assimilated into the organization and how that process led to the constructions of discourses and the development of the social movement. Through an analysis of the communicative encounters I experienced as an active member of the movement, insights were made that informed the understanding of this process.

It has been nearly twelve months to the day since I joined the Tea Party movement. I have since left the field and returned to the settings of my academic pursuits. As the days go by I find it easier to dissect my experiences with the Tea Party. Where once it was difficult for me to talk about my research, I now find it exhilarating. Drawing on my own experiences being assimilated into the Tea Party, participating in an enclave counterpublic, and engaging in discussion that in some small way acted to shape the direction of the Tea Party movement gives me added insights into these theory based concepts. I realize, however, that this type of research has changed me. The impacts and construction of one’s identity that takes place in research such as this is very real. During my time at the Tea Party I was constantly reminded how complex and unique life’s encounters can be. As I move forward with my life as a scholar I value these lived experiences. They are with me now as the rhetorical texts representative of my—and the Tea Party Patriots—collective past.
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